

**Haven in the Bay:
Problems of Community in the Novels of George Mackay Brown**

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I certify that this thesis has been composed by me, that the work is entirely my own, and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

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Abbreviations of Works by George Mackay Brown cited in the text:

<i>BOT</i>	Beside the Ocean of Time
<i>FI</i>	For the Islands I Sing
<i>G</i>	Greenvoe
<i>GB</i>	The Golden Bird
<i>M</i>	Magnus
<i>OT</i>	An Orkney Tapestry
<i>TRC</i>	Time in a Red Coat
<i>V</i>	Vinland

Full citations are provided at each text's first appearance in the thesis and in the Works Cited list on page 306.

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Introduction: The Problems of Community

“Prologue”, the first poem in George Mackay Brown’s first collection, sets the tone for all of his work to come. One of his most anthologised and analysed works, it places his writing in a context, not of modern thought, but of a wilful nostalgia and parochialism:

For the islands I sing
and for a few friends;
not to foster means
or be a midwife to ends.

Not for old Marx
and his moon-cold logic –
anthill dialectics,
neither gay nor tragic.

Not that extravagance
Lawrence understood –
golden phoenix
flowering from blood.¹

As the poem continues, Brown details those for whom he does “sing”: workers, tinkers and saints. In naming Marx and Lawrence as representatives of that writing to which he is opposed, Brown situates himself outside of both modern politics and literature: his writing is not end- or theory-driven, but observational, a writing of and for the land and people he knows best. He is concerned, in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, with: “the spacing of a bountiful community, whose *history* does not consist in accomplishing an *end*, but in letting new names, and new songs, arise unendingly”.² Community and poetry in Brown’s work are united in that they are not teleologically determined, but instead give birth to an untimely “song” in its purest form.³ This song does not have a political or historical end, but instead exists only, in Friedrich Nietzsche’s terminology, to

serve life.⁴ In this sense he can be contrasted with a poet like Hugh MacDiarmid, who in his “Second Hymn to Lenin” questions the validity of Scottish poetry insofar as it fails to capture a people or their history:

Are my poems spoken in the factories and fields,
In the streets o’ the toon?
Gin they’re no’, then I’m failin’ to dae
What I ocht to ha’ dune.⁵

MacDiarmid’s confrontational work stipulates a poetry that exists in a necessary relation to the people it depicts and their history: his poetry works towards political and aesthetic ends in order to engage and enrage the contemporary reader. If MacDiarmid, perhaps the dominant voice of poetry in twentieth-century Scotland, writes in order to engage the reader with questions of historical and political identity, Brown instead works within myth and history in order to establish a resonant depiction of a community and a people that lies outside of time:

Tinker themes cry through
The closes of my breath –
Straw and tapestry shaken
With keenings of love and birth;
Odyssean corn returning
Across furrows of death;
Women scanning the sea;
Ploughmen wounding the earth.⁶

Even with the dark undertones of a poem such as “Themes”, Brown retains a vision of the Orkneys and his own work which is essentially mythic and timeless. This perspective allows a reading of Brown, still dominant, in which he is seen as resolutely anti-modern, even primitive.

Indeed, Brown’s self-conception seems most closely related not to the work of other twentieth-century poets, but to Walter Scott’s idea of Orcadian and Shetland poets.⁷

In *The Pirate*, Scott writes of “legends [which] are, indeed, everywhere current amongst the vulgar; but the imagination is far more powerfully affected by them on the deep and dangerous seas of the north”.⁸ This gullible, superstitious imagination is given a full illustration in Scott’s depiction of the mediocre poet Halcro; Scott writes of a party where:

Halcro, now completely in his element, had assembled around him an audience, to whom he was declaiming his poetry with all the enthusiasm of glorious John himself, and receiving in return the usual degree of applause allowed to minstrels who recite their own rhymes – so long as the author is within hearing of the criticism. Halcro’s poetry might indeed have interested the antiquary as well as the admirer of the Muses, for several of his pieces were translations or imitations from the Scaldic sagas, which continued to be sung by the fishermen of these islands even until a very late period.⁹

The combination of mockery and nostalgic respect for such a poet echoes both Brown’s depiction of his own work and many of his critics. Here is a poet whose primary value is his appeal to his neighbours, a poet whose work is constructed from the familiar and echoes the Scandinavian sagas which the whole community knows. Halcro is a poet who resists politics and style in favour of a fidelity to older myths and stories: his poetry is purely parochial, and while Scott intimates that it would not even be suitable for his urban readers, any value it has is located in its reflection of, and appeal to, the place and community from which it comes. Forty years after “Prologue”, Brown’s poetry continues to place what he called “the lesser mysteries of art” within an anti-historic paradigm:

I know this about time,
It has set me on a distant shore.
It has given us history,
Not the circles of ceremony all men ought to rejoice in.¹⁰

There are injunctions to poets throughout his work: the poet must “Carve the runes / Then be content with silence”,¹¹ the call of the poet is: “Harp of whalebone, shake / Golden

words from my mouth””.¹² Brown’s self-representation is always that of the unschooled observer, a man who recounts the natural world and the communal legends around him for the benefit of those who know these things as well as he, but who is uninvolved in larger questions of being.

Brown’s view of his work as depicted in this early poetry has been taken for granted by the majority of his critical commentators. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray hail his “island agenda”,¹³ while Francis Russell Hart summarises his themes as the belief that “time will outlast history”,¹⁴ and indeed Cairns Craig places Brown within the context of “historylessness”.¹⁵ In a brief analysis of the novel *Greenvoe*, Craig condemns Brown’s use of “mythic content [that] emphasises the cyclic return that denies the forward trajectory of history”.¹⁶ The more sympathetic criticism of Berthold Schoene argues that Brown’s aim is: “to bring forth a narrative that would be at one with his vision of Orkney as a unique place and community with a singular, self-constant identity. He is striving for the creation of a historical myth.”¹⁷ In all of these studies, and in many more,¹⁸ critics bring forth Brown’s continual themes of history and community in order to illustrate that he is, in accordance with his own statements, fundamentally concerned not with the modern world, but with the formation and continuance of a mythic perspective on Orcadian life. As this thesis will attempt to show, however, the lasting value of Brown’s work is almost completely opposed to this reading. Throughout his work, especially in his novels, Brown engages with the questions of community and history, not to celebrate them blindly, but to problematise them.

The ways in which Brown engages with the problems of community are best seen in his prose works, especially in his novels. As much as his poetry remains the work for

which he is best known, it is in his novels that Brown engages most closely with the modern world; the longer prose form allows him not only to state an artistic or philosophical position, but to question it as well. A close reading of each of his novels reveals that he continually undermines his own stated positions and that he emphasises themes of community, history and myth not in order to accept and validate them, but to question what use these ideas may still have for the modern world. In this respect, his work is best understood with reference to contemporary thinkers of community such as Nancy, who is discussed in significant detail in the fourth and fifth chapters. Earlier chapters also discuss the relation of his work to thinkers as diverse as G.W.F. Hegel and Theodor Adorno, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Blanchot. While many, if not all, of these thinkers were unknown to Brown, an examination of their work in relation to Brown is crucial because they respond to the same problems. Rather than applying philosophy to literature, an integrated exploration of these philosophers in the context of Brown's work permits an approach to problems of community which require both conceptual and mythic thought. Like all of these thinkers, Brown's fundamental mission within his writings is to examine the foundationless world of modernity, and to see, in the wake of the loss of metaphysics and faith, what organising principles may remain. As a religious – Catholic – writer, Brown often extols a familiar Judeo-Christian foundational paradigm within his work: "a shaping divinity [that] takes over from our rough-hewings".¹⁹ It is simultaneously clear, however, that within his work this foundation is more desired than successfully implemented. Brown's novels speak to a desire for instantiated, constant history and myth, as well as the desire for a fully integrated community united by common work and faith, just as they recognise that such things are

now impossible. The tension between the world as it is desired and the world as it is forms the core of his works, and in that light Brown must be seen as a fully modern writer, one who engages with both the themes and aesthetic possibilities of contemporary fiction in order to document the failings and difficulties of the modern world.

Although this thesis will cover multiple facets of Brown's prose, it centres on the theme of community. I will argue that community is a primary theme throughout his work.²⁰ However, it is only recently that critics have come to understand that within Brown's writings it is "the destruction of a community [...] that is required for life to continue".²¹ It is not only, as Bevan and Murray write, that Brown "had a deep and abiding sense of community",²² but also that within his work this sense of what a community is, how it is established, what it demands and how it can be said to be meaningful in contemporary life, is continually questioned. As such, the question of community is a central point for any new reading of Brown which wishes to overturn the received reading of Brown as nothing more (or less) than a parochial writer of myth and fable. Brown's theme throughout his work is not only how a community is built, but also how it is destroyed, and what life may remain when the community, central to the individual's thinking of life itself, has been made obsolete. The community is, then, Brown's symbol of the foundation of being, and it is the chief signpost of his value as a modern writer that he refuses to take it for granted, but instead continually problematises it. Brown's writings of Orkney should not be read as anthro- or mytho-historic observation, but must be understood as attempts, coming from within a limited lexicon and narrative framework but no less significant for that, to understand the chief problems of modernity.

A. The Centrality of Community in Scottish Fiction

Brown is not, of course, the first Scottish writer of the twentieth century to question the value and formation of community. Indeed, both glib and profound studies of the nature of community can be said to be a central facet of Scottish writing over the past century. The community is approached both as a way of (historical or actual) being, and as a metonymic representation of Scottish society as a whole, whatever that might be. For Craig, this preoccupation with community is a way in which the Scottish novelist is able to address “the confrontation between what is outside history and unamenable to it, and what believes itself to be inside history”.²³ This confrontation surfaces not only in the twentieth-century novels discussed below, but also in the kailyard tradition inaugurated by J.M. Barrie. As Craig argues:

the narrator, as superior, educated, worldly commentator, submits the community to our scrutiny as an object of mockery for its narrow-minded parochialism, for its strange rituals and its unrelieved backwardsness; at the same time, however, in reaction against the harshness of the immediate environment – more spiritual now than economic [...] – the narrator becomes the voice of a lingering nostalgia for a lost sense of community based on religious commitments that have ceased to have any validity to Barrie’s audience.²⁴

Thus as far back as Barrie, and even as Scott, the community is used within Scottish fiction to illustrate both that which is outside history, insofar as it is parochial or even mythic, and that which is itself historical. Any depiction of community thus, in Craig’s view, automatically engages with the questions of history; the community comes to symbolise that element in Scottish history which constrains individual possibility, even when, as in Barrie, it also celebrates that very constraint. The myth of community arises “when the logic of history fails”;²⁵ community is both an idea located in particular history and the replacement of that history.

For Hart, the centrality of community in Scottish fiction comes about as a way of representing the “dominant myth” of “the wholeness of Scotland”.²⁶ Faced with a very real possibility of exodus, the “remnant that stays home, feeling inferior and defensive, makes compensatory myths”.²⁷ The myth of the historically-thriving and the ideologically-united community is necessitated by the very impossibility of such a community in a time of emigration and cultural change. In order to understand the place of Scots and Scottishness within history, it is necessary to create an historical myth, one which provides a foundation for all that follows. In terminology borrowed from Alan Riach, the community is one of “Scotland’s masks”,²⁸ a possibility for self-representation that allows a grounded whole where one might not in fact be possible. The community is thus constitutive of the popular iconography of Scotland, an iconography which “has been unmistakeable, internationally bankable and unusually stable for a long time. Through major changes in social economy, iconic images of Scottishness have been persistently and widely maintained.”²⁹ For Riach, the iconography of Scotland is not only externally imposed by the international media, but also constructed internally: it allows Scots to imagine themselves as part of an unchanging whole.³⁰ The oft-derided “tartanalia” that lays claim to much of Scotland’s place in the international imagination is thus seen by Riach not to be a symbol of external imagination, but also a dominant myth within the culture itself that allows a grounded self-representation. As in Craig’s analyses, community is used within Scottish culture, specifically in the arts, in order to create a foundational myth, a myth that permits resistance to the actual demands of history and modernity. The community can thus be perceived within Scottish culture as a

repository of, and a symbol for, the ahistoric: it is that which resists change and provides a foundation for all thought.

Within Scots-generated fiction, the twentieth century brought about a more critical view of community which, while challenging the nostalgic view found in the work of Barrie and Scott, still kept the community at the centre of Scottish life. George Douglas Brown,³¹ whose *The House with the Green Shutters* Brown hailed as: “The best Scottish novel of the twentieth century” (*FI* 20), began to question the value of community over sixty years before Brown’s *Greenvoe* made the community itself the inescapable focal point of his fiction. Douglas Brown’s vision of community is just as foundational as that of Scott or Barrie, but far more vitriolic; his aim in *The House with the Green Shutters* is to illustrate the ways in which community functions as a hindrance to individual thought and expression. For Douglas Brown, the emergence of community in rural Scotland comes not from mythic sources, but from boredom: “In a dull little country town the passing of a single cart is an event, and a gig is followed with the eyes until it disappears”.³² The gossip and public interference which lead to the downfall and death of the novel’s protagonists are often no more than a way to pass the time. The influence of the townspeople in the lives of these individuals is a central concern, but not truly explained: gossip and interference happen because the community allows them. Indeed, gossip and interference are themselves constitutive of the community. Mixed in with an early description of the town’s physical construction is an account of the centrality of gossip within the community:

In every little Scotch community there is a distinct type known as ‘the bodie’. ‘What does he do, that man?’ you may ask, and the answer will be, ‘Really, I could hardly tell ye what he does – he’s juist a bodie!’ [...] The chief occupation of his idle hours (and his hours are chiefly idle) is the discussion of his

neighbour's affairs. [...] It is in a small place like Barbie that such malignity is most virulent, because in a small place like Barbie every man knows everything to his neighbour's detriment.³³

A "small place like Barbie" breeds a petty and malignant community; the community does not function as a unified whole, but as a grouping of individuals whose primary aim is the undercutting of other individuals. Whatever beneficial wholeness is sought in the vision of the community is lost: that very wholeness of public opinion is presented as a damaging force beyond the control of those whom it involves.³⁴ The spirit of community is central to the novel, not in a spirit of either praise or nostalgia, but one of despair. For Douglas Brown, the idea of a community that forms the basis of small-town life is detrimental to all the individuals who dwell within the town.

In Craig's analysis, the community within the novel is predicated on fear: "The fear in which the community lies prostrate before a hostile environment is not an isolated moment in its existence but the very essence of the whole pattern of its life. [...] The morality by which the community operates is a morality of mutual fear and mistrust."³⁵ The primacy of fear and competition is indeed foregrounded throughout the novel; what is less explored, both in Craig's analysis and in the novel itself, is how this situation came to be realised. Craig argues that Douglas Brown's depiction of the Scottish community is essentially external: "The community presented in Barbie is irredeemable, but the values by which it is judged so are values which have – and can have – no existence in the community itself: they have to be continually brought in from outside."³⁶ The authorial voice in the novel certainly bears out this reading:

It was strange that a thing so impalpable as gossip should influence so strong a man as John Gourlay to his ruin. But it did. The bodies of Barbie became not only the chorus to Gourlay's tragedy, buzzing it abroad and discussing his

downfall; they became also, merely by their maddening tattle, a villain of the piece and an active cause of the catastrophe.³⁷

The community is here viewed from the outside; its mechanisms are strange and even unthinkable, and can only be recounted. Yet one of the most striking aspects of Douglas Brown's depiction of community remains unaccounted for in Craig's reading: the parochial community of Barbie is mirrored by the academic community of Edinburgh in order to demonstrate that such a community is not limited to a particular place, but that community itself is, by its very nature, a force that harms the individual.

John Gourlay finds a makeshift community in the bars of Edinburgh; as his alcoholism develops, so does his need for community itself:

Young Gourlay spent that winter in Edinburgh pretty much as he had spent the last. Last winter, however, it was simply a weak need for companionship that drew him to the Howff. This winter it was more, it was the need of a formed habit that must have its wonted satisfaction. He had a further impulse to conviviality now. It had become a habit that compelled him.³⁸

Community, whether rural or urban, is thus presented as a habit and a need. Of all the characters in the novel, John Gourlay is the most likely, through his outside education, to perceive the damaging power of the community, but he too falls into the trap of such a community. His downfall, which leads to his father's death, comes not from his own desires but from his need to answer to the community at large. In Douglas Brown's vision, then, the community is something inescapable. It is not limited to the "little Scotch community", but is instead an inherent part of life itself. Craig writes that "The narrative voice continually establishes patterns of comparison which will assure us that this is not the world",³⁹ but the Edinburgh scenes serve to point out quite the contrary: this is the world. Community, even when despised as strongly as in *The House with the Green Shutters*, is inescapable: it is the primary path for human function. Thus, as much

as Douglas Brown despairs of community and uses it as a focal point for his anger, it is not less foundational to his writing than it is in earlier, more idyllic or nostalgic works. The community is ultimately that which denies an external perspective, because it is the grounding of human interaction itself. As much as one can rail against its damaging power, it is impossible to conceive of a world that does not put community in a central position.

Douglas Brown's greatest contribution to Scottish literature, then, is a redefinition of community that allows it to be used as a foundational term. The community is not necessarily specific to a given location, although the idea of a place is usually central. While critics speaking of "community" in Scottish fiction tend to use the term to refer to any literature that examines the life of a town as a whole, Douglas Brown, in his depiction of multiple communities in various places, opens it up. The community is also not entirely ephemeral in its reference to collective thought or gossip, although that too is a dominant aspect. Rather, community is the way in which a group of people, selected either by place or culture, come to think of themselves. The gossip of *Barbie* is the way in which its inhabitants come to know themselves; community is central to the novel because it forms the basis of both physical and ideological gathering. Community is thus, in Heideggerian terms (which will be explored throughout this thesis), both *logos* – "the originally gathering gatheredness that constantly holds sway in itself"⁴⁰ – and *Mitsein*, or 'being-with'. Community, after Douglas Brown, becomes a term that applies to the individual's understanding of herself in relation to the world around her: it is the foundation that one opposes or embraces, but is always there.

A somewhat less dismissive, if similarly foundational, view of community is found at the centre of another key text of twentieth-century Scottish fiction, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*. Gibbon's trilogy routinely tops "Best Scottish Novel" popular contests and is given a central position in most critical surveys of Scottish fiction; its views of community and Scottish life are difficult to ignore. The trilogy depicts the life of Chris Guthrie in three successive communities: the rural (Kinraddie, *Sunset Song*), the town (Segget, *Cloud Howe*) and the city (Duncairn, *Grey Granite*). This shift of physical communities is paralleled by a simultaneous shift in ideological communities. Kinraddie is a version of the nostalgic, unified yet individualistic, community of Scottish writing past: "So that was Kinraddie that bleak winter of nineteen eleven and the new minister, him they chose early next year, he was to say it was the Scots countryside itself, fathered between a kailyard and a bonny brier bush in the lee of a house with green shutters."⁴¹ The references to John Watson (whose 1896 *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* is often seen as an exemplar of kailyard fiction) and Douglas Brown here foreground the way in which Gibbon is using Scottish literary tradition to inform a view of community in which place, especially uncultivated land, is of primary value:

Sea and sky and the folk who wrote and fought and were learned, teaching and saying and praying, they lasted but as a breath, a mist of fog in the hills, but the land was forever, it moved and changed below you, but was forever, you were close to it and it to you, not at a bleak remove it held you and hurtled you.⁴²

When Guthrie moves to Segget, she is forced to interact with a more humanly constituted community, one not dissimilar from that of Douglas Brown. The townsfolk of Segget are closely related to those of Barbie, bored, quarrelsome and interfering: "The folk of the Mills would hang round the room where their dole was paid by a little clerk, they'd laze there and snicker at the women that passed, and yawn, with weariness

stamped on each face; and smoke, and whistle, and yawn some more".⁴³ The sense of a judgemental community is aided by Gibbon's occasional use of the second-person (a trope which appears throughout his writing):

Segget crowded the kirk the first Sunday in May after the General Strike collapsed, to hear what that cocky billy Colquhoun would say of his tink-like socialists now. But he never mentioned the creatures at all, he preached a sermon that maddened you, just, he said there was nothing new under the sun: and that showed you the kind of twister he was.⁴⁴

If Kinraddie is the Scottish past and Segget is the present, then the ideological community that forms among the communists in Duncairn is the future. Although the town-centred community is equally harsh as in Segget, Ewan finds a possibility of a greater community in political thought:

he lay still with a strange mist boiling, blinding his eyes, not Ewan Tavendale at all any more but lost and be-bloodied in a hundred broken and tortured bodies all over the world, in Scotland, in England, in the torture-dens of the Nazis in Germany, in the torment-pits of the Polish Ukraine, a livid, twisted thing in the prisons where they tortured the Nanking Communists, a Negro boy in an Alabama cell while they thrust the razors into his flesh, castrating with a lingering cruelty and care. He was one with them all. [...] And a kind of stinging bliss came upon him, knowledge that he was that army itself.⁴⁵

While Ewan eventually loses his political passion, this ideological community which exists both through and in counterpart to the physical community of Duncairn is perhaps Gibbon's presentation of a community which does not reject its physical and social foundation, but rises above it.

What unites these three disparate communities, besides the ability of the individual to thrive in and despite them all, is the community's ability to comment on itself. As Craig argues:

the author's alienation is not the basis for a disenchanted and literary framing of the community's life, but for a narrative structure in which the community, through its gossip and its reminiscence, becomes the organiser of the narration,

inserting into the body of Grassie Gibbon's fiction the fictions with which it embroiders its own life and through which it expresses its own imaginative vitality.⁴⁶

The blend of narrative voices, including the second-person addressed above, produces an idea of the community as that which recognises itself. Community is thus foundational not because of historic or social factors, although these cannot be discounted, but because existence in community is itself the way through which the community comes to know and understand itself. Community is not a term that labels something that already exists; instead, it is through thinking of themselves as a community that community comes into being. Community, as a concept and as a reality, is central to both the novel and to the lives it depicts because it allows for a degree of self-representation which cannot be achieved in any other way. Thus Chris Guthrie's struggle for individual determination is not counter to the will of the community (as such struggles are in Douglas Brown), but a part of the community itself. As argued by Craig, such a struggle "is not the gateway to a *hubris* brought about by stepping beyond the community's boundaries: it is a fulfilment of one set of values which the community has helped to breed in her; through her, as a result, the community itself will be enlarged and made more significant".⁴⁷ The community is the vehicle through which both individuals and the community emerge as themselves.

The voice of the community, at once unified and diffuse, is thus the central aspect of the trilogy. Craig's earlier reservations about Gibbon's work – his claims that it illustrates the "terrible and destructive"⁴⁸ power of an engagement with history – may thus be seen to be less central to a reading of the novels than a focus on the way in which Gibbon uses the novels to illustrate the constructive power of community. For Craig:

“Where Ewan confronts history as remembrance, but remembrance only of violence and death, Chris confronts life as amnesia, cyclic and without progression; a world where history has no meaning”.⁴⁹ Such claims ignore that these confrontations with history and life take place within (and against) the foundation of community itself, and that for Gibbon the individual’s ability to confront history at all is only made possible by her engagement with the surrounding community. The community may be ahistorical, as in *Sunset Song*, but it remains that which allows an engagement with history. The development of a communal voice is best illustrated in Gibbon’s late, unfinished novel *Speak of the Mearns*. The novel’s early narration alternates between third-person observation and a first- and second-person voice tied to Keith, the youngest son of the central family. As a young child, Keith uses the first-person: “It was late in the jog of an April day when our flitting of Montrose came through the Howe, over the hill of Auchindreich and into the crinkly cup of the village. [...] I couldn’t see it [a rainbow] though Alick held me up and pointed it out from the back box-cart.”⁵⁰ As the child becomes aware of his place in the world and begins to describe not only his own observations but the life of the people around him, he begins to employ a second-person narration: “Father said ‘Ay we’ll be at it all day. Can you send out the dinner at twelve, would you say?’ and Mother said couldn’t he come home for it, like a decent man, he’d be tired enough, her eyes upon him in that way that she sometimes had, it made you ashamed that anybody should look at father, like that”.⁵¹ Finally, when Keith grows too ill to narrate, the voice of the novel shifts to a third-person “folk”, who narrate sundry events collectively:

As the new year came blustering into the Howe, folk took the news of the parish through hand, standing up douce and snug in the bar and watching the whirl and

break of the flakes that the wind drove down from the hills to the sea like an old wife shake the chaff from a bed. Ay, God, there hadn't been a winter like this, said Gunn of Lamahip, since 'yt, he minded it well, he as fee'd at that time up in place in Aberdeen, called Monymusk, one morning he woke and looked out of the bothy window, b'god, the farm place had vanished entire, nothing about but the shroud of snow.⁵²

The voicing in this passage shifts, at times unnoticed and unsignified, from person to person; even as individuals contribute their own stories, what emerges is a communal narration.

What Gibbon thus reveals in this progression of voices is the way in which the community itself becomes both the dominant theme of the novel and also permits a self-reflexivity from the characters. The communal voice is the way in which the community knows itself to be what it is. The community is thus formed not only, as in Craig's analysis, a response to, or more often against, history, but it is the way in which history itself can be perceived. Even those individuals who live in defiance of the community, like Chris Guthrie herself, are only able to do so by using the foundational characteristics of the community as something against which to define oneself. Rather than questioning the validity of the community, as Douglas Brown attempts to do, Gibbon finally cements its foundational character: the community is ultimately that through which all life must be considered.

The influence of Douglas Brown and Gibbon has been unsurpassed in twentieth-century Scottish literature. Novels as diverse as William McIlvanney's *Docherty* and Robin Jenkins's *Fergus Lamont* chart the individual's attempt to overcome the constraints of community in a manner often reminiscent of Douglas Brown, while novels from Willa Muir's *Imagined Corners* to Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* have followed Gibbon's portrayal of a community that is constitutive of the very idea of self, even when

that self is engaged in trying to escape the community. Yet relatively few novels have clearly engaged with the fundamental question of how it is that community has been instituted as the foundation of Scottish thought; while the role of the community has continually been placed under examination, its very existence has often been taken for granted. The following chapters will attempt to show that, contrary to dominant critical belief, the novels of George Mackay Brown fill that very necessary role: by placing not only actual communities, but the idea of community itself, at their centre, they allow a wide-ranging critique of the value of community and the possibility of foundational thinking. Brown is of course not alone in this mission: his novels are closely paralleled by those of Iain Crichton Smith, whose work similarly engages with the construction and ideology of the community.

Smith himself claims that his first novel, *Consider the Lilies*, is not an historical study, but rather “a fictional study of one person. [...] It is only the story of one old woman confronted by eviction.”⁵³ Contemporary with *Greenvoe*, Smith’s novel engages in a similar exploration of the ways in which the individual not only defines herself according to the surrounding community, but also attempts to understand why that community should itself form a foundation for her way of life. Mrs Scott considers herself to be a member of two communities, that of the church and that of the familial dead:

She remembered her own father dying, with his long white beard. He was a good age when he died, yet was as frightened as a child in the silent house. Her father and mother remained as presences in the house. So did her husband, even though he had died in another country. She remembered his small alert moustached face emerging dripping out of the basin of water.⁵⁴

When these two communities fall into discord – that is, when Mrs Scott is required by the church to leave her home, with its presences of the dead – she is forced to reconsider her role as an individual. She turns for help to Donald MacLeod, a staunch individualist and atheist, presented in the first part of the novel as her ideological opposite. MacLeod is opposed to the founding institutions of the community, but yet becomes the defender of the community itself: ““You know, Mrs Scott, living in a small village can be difficult. And yet whenever I go to Edinburgh I want back to this village. You wouldn’t think that, would you? For people talk. They talk all the time. You’d think that was all they had to do. What was it like, those years when you looked after your mother?””⁵⁵ Thus while MacLeod is as suspicious of his neighbour’s gossip as Gourlay in *The House with the Green Shutters*, he is also able to use the “talk” of the community to engage fully with another person. Even this is insufficient; MacLeod is shortly thereafter shown looking for the word “which would bring him closer to her”:

Obscurely he felt that it was important to him to find the word and to be able to say it, so that he would be united with her and what she was. Perhaps only the poets would be able to find that word. Or perhaps it didn’t exist. But it must exist. Somewhere it lay concealed under lies and differences, like the soot in a black house which could be used to fertilise the land. Somewhere, if he could tear the beams apart, the dry old beams, he would find it and build a new kind of house.⁵⁶

What Smith is documenting here is the need for community: for a community of individual engagement that continues to appear even when the traditional forms and institutions of community have failed.⁵⁷ Smith thus focuses his novel not on the community as it appears in history, but on the need for community as that which would allow one individual to engage with another. Community becomes foundational not only

because it allows self-referentiality, but because it forms the ground for basic human interaction.

This intertwined theme of the impossibility of communal continuance, of the necessary failure of all that which constitutes community, and the continuing need for communal foundations, drives and grounds the work of both Brown and Smith. In a late essay, “Real People in a Real Place”, Smith explicitly argues for the centrality of community in the work of the Scottish island writer. The community, although not idealised, is itself the symbol of how the rural or island life differs from the life of the exile or the city:

It is this sense of a community that one thinks of most when one compares the island with the city. It was because of the community that the fact of exile became so desolating and frightening. [...] The positive side [of the community] is the sense of warmth, settledness, that it gives, the feeling that one has a place, a name, that one will not be consigned to the chilly air of pure individuality. It is the sense that what one belongs to is a sustaining force [... although] it is nearly always conservative and hostile to change.⁵⁸

The community thus represents a reality in which the individual is grounded: it is a reality which is now fleeting and oft-abandoned, but nevertheless central to the depiction of a certain manner of being. As Smith writes: “This is a real society in a real world and it will therefore be characterised by the particular reality to which it belongs”.⁵⁹ Smith thus follows the writers mentioned above in his depiction of a community which is not naïve but instead very real: to write about the community is not an attempt to escape from history, but rather an attempt to depict the lives of people as they are actually lived. The community in his work thus refers both to a basic way of being and to a particular lifestyle distinct to the Scottish islands. Community is thus at once universal and particular, historical and eternal: it is the foundation on which all understanding of the

way in which people live is based. The interrelation of these senses of community drives much of Smith's work and, as will be revealed below, that of Brown himself.

B. Community and the Crisis of Foundationalism

Brown's foregrounding of the nature and constitution of community is not only the way in which he approaches and even redefines the Scottish literary tradition, but also the primary way in which he can be seen to engage with modernity itself. The interrelation of community and being, community and meaning, is one of the dominant themes of contemporary thought; indeed, any careful thinking of community must take into account the way in which it provides or determines that system of relations which is necessary to the very concept of being itself.⁶⁰ As Howard Caygill has argued, the “‘making and unmaking’ of philosophy [in the twentieth century] increasingly entailed the deconstruction of the writing of community”.⁶¹ Writers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, who work from what might be called an anti-foundational perspective, argue that: “There is no meaning if meaning is not shared [*partagé*], and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of Being”.⁶² Again, drawing out the meaning of *partager*: “The unity of the world is not one: it is made of a diversity, and even disparity and opposition”.⁶³ For Simon Malpas, modernity must respond to this idea of diversity and difference: “art responds to the fragmentation of the contemporary with a presentation of the difference at the heart of being-in-common. [...] Art [...] activates the sense that difference is. [...] It] is what touches upon the differences between us that form the basis of community, and reminds us of the necessity of being in common.”⁶⁴ This use of art to comment on both

difference and community is paramount in Brown's writing, as will be shown throughout the following chapters. While Nancy's writings on community and being will be central to the following interpretation of Brown, however, it is first necessary to place these ideas within a larger reference of post-enlightenment metaphysical thought.

In the wake of David Hume and Immanuel Kant, a foundational metaphysics grounded on God or first principles has been made impossible, but the place of metaphysics in philosophy has remained central; as Kant writes: "What has hitherto been called metaphysics cannot satisfy any critical mind, but to forego it entirely is impossible".⁶⁵ While Kant has been criticised by some anti-foundationalist philosophers for continuing to privilege the idea of God – and his metaphysics indeed is structured to make room for God – sympathetic critics such as Henry Allison make it clear that this is not arbitrary: "Kant is not attempting to provide an exhaustive inventory of all metaphysical positions, actual or possible. His concern is rather with a certain kind of metaphysical reasoning, namely, one that leads to the positing of transcendent entities."⁶⁶ The fundamental metaphysical shift found in Kant is thus not one of result, but of grounding; Kant shows that the error of previous metaphysics is in external grounding, and that any future metaphysics must be founded on (human) knowledge itself.⁶⁷ Metaphysics thus becomes not a system based on faith, but on reason: metaphysics is the name "given to the whole system of pure philosophy, critical philosophy included, and may designate the investigation into the sources of possibility of *a priori* cognition, as well as the presentation of the *a priori* cognitions which form a system of pure philosophy".⁶⁸ For the purposes of this introduction, this point cannot be over-

elaborated, but what is necessarily retained from Kant is the transition from external foundations to a metaphysics based on reason.

I am very far from holding these concepts [of the community of things] to be derived merely from experience, and the necessity represented in them to be fictitious and a mere illusion produced in us by long habit. On the contrary, I have amply shown that they and the principles derived from them are firmly established *a priori* before all experience and have their undoubted objective rightness, though only with regard to experience.⁶⁹

Kant thus rejects the traditional foundations of metaphysics in order to replace them with new foundations; yet his questioning of foundations influences all future metaphysical thinking.

For Heidegger, it is this very question of foundationalism which defines metaphysics: “Ground-laying is now elucidation of the essence of a comporting towards beings in which this essence shows itself in itself so that all assertions about it become provable on the basis of it”.⁷⁰ After Kant, metaphysics is the question of its foundation, or what he calls in the Davos lectures the “metaphysics of metaphysics”.⁷¹ In his reading of Kant, metaphysics is grounded on finite human knowledge (and, later, on imagination); at the same time, however, Heidegger expands upon Kant to demonstrate that metaphysics takes in part a communal view of being: that is, that its focus must always remain beings in the form of being-together. Even as “the true is always only what the individual human being thinks”⁷² – that is, the communal sense of being does not directly correlate with truth itself – the interplay between Being and beings remains at the centre of metaphysical inquiry. The roots of modern analyses of community from Blanchot onward are revealed in Heidegger’s comment on Kant: “For a finite creature, beings are accessible only on the grounds of a preliminary letting-stand-against which turns-our-attention-toward. In advance, this takes the beings which can possibly be

encountered into the unified horizon of a possible belonging-together. In the face of what is encountered, this a priori unifying unity must grasp in advance.”⁷³ Heidegger locates this advance (foundational) grasping in time and intuition. More importantly for this project, however, he reveals that any understanding of the foundations of metaphysics also necessitates an understanding of the way in which community can itself function as foundation.

At the same time, however, the question of foundations always opens itself to the opposite: “because we are questioning, it remains an open question whether the ground is a truly grounding, foundation-effecting, originary ground; whether the ground refuses to provide a foundation, and so is an abyss; or whether the ground is neither the one nor the other, but merely offers the perhaps necessary illusion of a foundation and is thus an un-ground”.⁷⁴ Thus for Heidegger, and indeed for virtually all post-Kantian thinkers, the problem of foundations is that, once having been questioned, the way in which they can continue to function becomes itself a question. For Heidegger, the solution is to move from “asking about beings as such (metaphysics)” to “asking about Being as such”.⁷⁵ How Heidegger approaches this shift from beings to Being, and the way in which such a shift influences his thinking on being-together, will be addressed at greater length in chapters two and five. For those thinkers who do not make such a shift – that is, for those who continue to focus on metaphysics’ questioning of beings – a nonfoundational metaphysics, or even postmetaphysics, has emerged. Yet in all discussions of contemporary attempts to formulate a nonmetaphysics or postmetaphysics, the charge Heidegger used against Jean-Paul Sartre, and which Adorno in turn brought against Heidegger himself, remains: “a philosophy’s denial that it is metaphysics does not settle

the question whether it is or not, but it does justify the suspicion that untruth may hide in the refusal to admit its metaphysical content”.⁷⁶ Adorno’s critique of Heidegger and metaphysics will be explored at length in the first chapter; before that, however, it is necessary to examine other attempts to move past metaphysics in contemporary thought. One of the most prominent examples of this move is best seen in the work of Jürgen Habermas, which is itself in part a rethinking of the Hegelian project.

Hegel takes up the nonfoundational concerns of Kant in order to demonstrate further that metaphysics cannot rely on an external foundation, but that it must be seen as “the science of things set and held in thoughts”.⁷⁷ As he writes: “The real nature of the object is brought to light in reflection; but it is no less true that this exertion of thought is *my act*”.⁷⁸ The problem of pre-Kantian metaphysics for Hegel is not only that it “took the laws and forms of thought to be the fundamental laws and forms of things”,⁷⁹ but also that it took the totalities of God, the Soul and the World “as subjects made and ready, to form the basis for an application of the categories of the understanding”.⁸⁰ Traditional metaphysics must thus be discarded because it both misunderstands thought and naively postulates totalities in accordance with “popular conception”. Yet as Habermas argues, early critics of Hegel (in this case Feuerbach, Marx and Kierkegaard) found within his idealism “a secret preponderance of what is universal, supratemporal, and necessary over what is particular, variable, and accidental, and thus the idealistic casting given to the concept of reason”.⁸¹ Habermas finds within the first line of post-Kantian metaphysical thinking running from Hegel to Heidegger an inability to work fully outside of foundationalism and transcendentalism: “All these attempts to detranscendentalize reason get entangled in the prior conceptual decisions of transcendental philosophy, decisions in

which they remain trapped”.⁸² Habermas’s project thus develops a philosophical approach that is unhindered by prior transcendental philosophy; he attempts to accomplish this through the formation of understanding of the “lifeworld”⁸³ determined not by an instantiated, subject-driven community, but by a linguistic community. This linguistic community, conceptualised as the public sphere, offers a non-systemic approach to rationality, an approach that retains some of the explanatory benefits of metaphysics without being encumbered by metaphysics’ transcendental past.

Summarising the impact of Kant on modernity, Habermas postulates that his nonfoundational, postmetaphysical view of the public sphere supplies the necessary break with traditional metaphysics that Kant and Hegel were ultimately unable to provide. Habermas argues that such a reconceptualisation of metaphysics is made necessary by modernity itself:

Only up to the threshold of modernity are a culture’s accomplishments of reaching self-understanding joined together in interpretive systems that preserve a structure homologous to the lifeworld’s entire structure of horizons. Until that point, the unity, unavoidably supposed, of a lifeworld constructed concentrically around “me” and “us,” here and now, had been reflected in the totalizing unity of mythological narratives, religious doctrines, and metaphysical explanations. With modernity, however, a devaluing shift befell those forms of explanation that had allowed these very theories to retain a remnant of the unifying force possessed by myths of origin.⁸⁴

Habermas stipulates a “postmetaphysical thinking” which follows Hegel’s intent if not his apparent failings. This postmetaphysics does not offer a total worldview, but, according to Peter Dews’s defence, “accommodate[s] the powerful arguments of the anti-foundationalists, while nevertheless avoiding the slide into relativism”.⁸⁵ Habermas attempts, after what he perceives as the destructive arguments of Heidegger and Adorno, to reassert a metaphysics that remains free of foundationalism but yet, through a focus on

experience and communicative practice, retains some of the explanatory power and rationality of metaphysics. As he writes: “what has, following the disintegration of metaphysical and religious worldviews, been divided up on the level of cultural systems under various aspects of validity, can now be put together – and also put right – only in the experiential context of lifeworld practices”.⁸⁶ Philosophy can thus only be fully realised in modernity when it adopts a pragmatic approach. More specifically, Habermas engages with the use of language itself in his exploration of the lifeworld:

the linguistically disclosed and structured lifeworld finds its footing only in the practices of reaching understanding within a linguistic community. In this way, the linguistic formation of consensus, by means of which interactions link up in space and time, remains dependent upon the autonomous “yes” and “no” positions that communication participants take toward criticisable validity claims.⁸⁷

The lifeworld is made up of no more or less than the linguistic community, and the existence of that community comes about through its ability to validate statements. Habermas refrains from making truth-claims in this theory of validation, but is instead interested in public understandability: “anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated”.⁸⁸ What his pragmatic approach illustrates is how it is possible for a speech act, once performed, to be understood; for Habermas, this can only be accomplished within the realm of the public sphere. Habermas thus postulates a collective identity, in the form of the linguistic community, which is nonfoundational, yet nevertheless “secures continuity and recognizability, [...] determines how a society demarcates itself from its natural and social environments [...] and] regulates the membership of individuals in society”.⁸⁹ The linguistic community, predicated on ‘communicative action’, thus provides a nontranscendental, pragmatic, inter-subjective

approach to philosophy that allows a full engagement with modernity's predication on relation. This postmetaphysical thought thus overturns any need within philosophy for a reliance on the subject or a claim to the essential nature of the world.

Habermas most clearly approaches the value of a postmetaphysical approach when he uses George Herbert Mead's theory of subjectivity to explain the dangers of the inherent universalism in metaphysical thought. For Habermas, "as long as idealist modes of thought remain in use, the universal will triumph over the individual, which is banished to ineffability".⁹⁰ Within the communicative lifeworld, however, once these idealist modes are banished intersubjectivity itself can give rise to individuation. Self-consciousness "possesses an intersubjective core";⁹¹ as both an autonomous and an individuated being, "the self of the practical relation-to-self cannot reassure itself about itself through direct relation but only via the perspective of others".⁹² What Habermas is here attempting to demonstrate is that the self, which in Hegel and Kant is posited as central to the determination of reason, is itself formed in relation to the linguistic community. Such a community is thus nonfoundational but nevertheless formative: in this understanding of the function and necessity of the communicative lifeworld, reason itself can only be approached or determined through the linguistic community. The linguistic community thus provides an approach to those ideas, such as the self or the (instantiated) community, considered foundational by traditional metaphysics.

As complete as Habermas's defence of the public sphere appears to be, however, it nevertheless opens itself to criticisms of idealism and even foundationalism. In order for the linguistic community to function, an *a priori* understanding of the use of the speech act is presupposed. Habermas argues that "In communicative action participants

presuppose that they know what mutual recognition of reciprocally raised validity claims mean. [It is possible that] in addition they can rely on a shared definition of the situation and thereupon act consensually.”⁹³ He does not, however, address how it is that this situation comes to be realised. While in the previous quotation he suggests that participants may not rely on a shared definition of the situation, he fails to address how such circumstances may arise, or how they fit into the public sphere itself. Habermas’s postmetaphysical thinking thus fails to provide a complete answer to the problems of foundation, because despite its pragmatic intent, it fails to take account of actual communicative forms fully, but instead offers ideal communication as a grounding in itself. For Fredric Jameson, who postulates history as the ultimate (nontranscendental) ground of understanding, there is nothing “to be gained by opposing one reified theme – History – by another – Language – in a polemic debate as to ultimate priority of one over the other”.⁹⁴ For Jameson, Habermas does not achieve a pure nonfoundationalism, but instead only places an idealised version of language as the grounds for his inquiry.

Jameson, in rejecting Habermas’s model, seeks instead to determine “how History as a ground and as an absent cause can be conceived in such a way as to resist such thematization or reification, such transformation back into one option code among others”.⁹⁵ History itself, as textually revealed, is the way in which the question of beings can be approached. It is not a foundation as such, but the way in which it is revealed reopens the question of beings, specifically the – for Jameson, explicitly political – question of how it is that beings are brought into relation. He formulates the argument “that history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the

Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious”.⁹⁶ Jameson’s approach is thus a polarisation of Habermas: while the latter posits a linguistic community which occasions a questioning of being, Jameson begins with the linguistic acts, memorialised as texts, which reveal the (absent) causality of history. Both, however, locate their understanding of beings within a nonfoundational yet overarching framework, be it the linguistic community or history. Jameson attempts to understand history without historicising it; indeed, a denunciation of periodisation is at the centre of his work:

I want to argue that this operation [of periodising] is intolerable and unacceptable in its very nature, for it attempts to take a point of view on individual events which is well beyond the observational capacities of any individual, and to unify, both horizontally and vertically, hosts of realities whose interrelationships must remain inaccessible and unverifiable, to say the least.⁹⁷

Jameson thus attempts to define or discover the affects of history while refusing to place history in the position of a present cause, that is, a foundation.

Jameson most directly addresses the intertwining of community and foundationalism in his recent work on utopian fiction. Writing earlier on Northrop Frye, he warily posits a social hermeneutic which focuses on the community; within such an hermeneutic: “Only the community, indeed, can dramatize that self-sufficient intelligible unity (or ‘structure’) of which the individual body, like the individual ‘subject,’ is a decentered ‘effect’”.⁹⁸ Frye’s reading is thus a positive hermeneutic, one which identifies “mythic patterns in modern texts aim[ed] at reinforcing our sense of the affinity between the cultural present of capitalism and the distant mythical past of tribal societies, and at awakening a sense of the continuity between our psychic life and that of primitive peoples”.⁹⁹ This positive hermeneutic, which attempts to filter out historical difference,

is matched by a negative one, which would “sharpen our sense of historical difference”. The utopian writers Jameson analyses are those who attempt to work within this negative hermeneutic when the very notion of historical difference has been lost within modernity: “Consumer society, media society, the ‘society of the spectacle’, late capitalism [...] is striking in its loss of a sense of the historical past and of historical futures”.¹⁰⁰ The utopian project is a “representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality”.¹⁰¹ The value of utopian fiction is thus that it reposit historical difference in a social/temporal context which is itself predicated on an ignorance of that difference. The utopian can be read as being focused on the quotidian: “a third way in which individual and collective time come to be identified with each other is in the very experience of everyday life, according to Roland Barthes the quintessential sign of utopian representation”.¹⁰² For a writer such as Thomas More, the very notion of historical difference emerges from a rejection of certain forms of history: in More, utopia must “implicitly or explicitly define history itself by way of a splitting or a reduction in which it is bad history – political history – which is [...] neutralized [...], while what remains – something like Utopian everyday life, perhaps – then emerges as truly utopian”.¹⁰³ And yet, of course, the utopian fiction is always also political in intent as well as form; it is here, where political history is both disgarded and elevated, that the political unconscious most clearly reveals itself.

Jameson finds in utopian fiction a blend of the synchronic and diachronic which is explicated by Sartre, who “will both demonstrate that a non-centralized collective or group dynamic is possible, and show its historical transformation into a different form”.¹⁰⁴ Diachronic causality is historically determined but also arbitrary; it “tends to

isolate a causal line which might have been different, [...] which can very easily be replaced by an alternate hypothesis”.¹⁰⁵ The synchronic, on the other hand, refers at least obliquely to a Hegelian ground, in which “all causes are already there”. The utopian fictions Jameson examines fluctuate between the diachronic and synchronic, often embracing them simultaneously, in order to create a portrait of the world that is both historically-determined and nondifferentiated, a world which is both political and everyday. History, then, in its political formulation, is thus both the way in which beings are approached and an absent cause; in a Heideggerian formulation, it is thus the ground and the unground at once.

C. Brown, Community and Foundations

At this point, we can begin to return to the work of Brown himself. Previous readings of Brown have tended towards the positive hermeneutic that Jameson finds in Frye; this discussion will attempt to show that, just as in the fictions on which Jameson focuses, there is a far more complex intertwining of the positive and negative, a simultaneous embrace and rejection of historical differentiation. For those who have read Brown’s interviews and essays on his work, this may be a surprising leap, for it must be born in mind that Brown frequently argued for a pre-Kantian understanding of the world, focusing on the primacy of God and the unified, instantiated community. Yet, as this thesis will show, Brown’s own work is far more complex than he himself admitted, and far more engaged with the problems of modernity and foundationalism than has yet been examined. In order to address his work completely, a wide variety of thinkers from all sides of the foundational spectrum will be examined; while Heidegger and Nancy are the

most constant referents throughout this thesis, a range of viewpoints will be addressed in order to explore the complexity of Brown's thought. The five chapters of this thesis are organised thematically, rather than chronologically, around his novels, as it is in the long prose form that Brown was best able to explore these themes.

The first chapter focuses on Brown's final novel, *Beside the Ocean of Time*, and applies an Adorno-inspired reading attentive to its potential Romanticism. The second examines *Magnus*, perhaps Brown's central work, and the way in which Brown uses the novel to posit sacrifice as the centre of communal life. In the third chapter, Brown's two historical novels, *Vinland* and *Time in a Red Coat* are addressed; it is in these that Brown most explicitly engages with questions of historical difference. *Greenvoe*, Brown's first and most famous novel, is addressed in the fourth chapter, for it is only at this point that the complexity and contrariness of his views of community can be completely understood. A final chapter turns towards Brown's non-fiction prose, in order to examine how his own analyses of his fiction and life both differ from and confirm the previous findings. Brown's short stories, perhaps the form in which he best excelled, will be addressed throughout. The range of Brown's work examined and the variance of philosophical viewpoints to which these works are compared will demonstrate that Brown was, far more than has been realised, a major thinker of community.

NOTES

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- ¹ Brown, George Mackay Brown, The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown, ed. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (London: John Murray, 2005) 1.
- ² Jean-Luc Nancy, The Birth to Presence, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 57. Italics in original.
- ³ See Nietzsche's concept of the "untimely", in which each song is a re-origination, as well as his analysis of a "misemployed and appropriated culture": Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, ed. Daniel Breazale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 161ff.
- ⁴ Nietzsche 59.
- ⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, Selected Poetry, ed. Alan Riach and Michael Grieve (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2004) 134.
- ⁶ Brown, Collected Poems 21.
- ⁷ As Fergusson repeatedly mentions, Brown found *The Pirate* unreadable. (Maggie Fergusson, George Mackay Brown: The Life (London: John Murray, 2006) 32,92.) As such it may be seen not as a direct inspiration for Brown, but as a depiction of a certain way of forming art in which Brown also engages.
- ⁸ Sir Walter Scott, The Pirate, (1822; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1897) 25.
- ⁹ Scott, The Pirate 162-3.
- ¹⁰ Brown, Complete Poems 316.
- ¹¹ Brown, Collected Poems 378.
- ¹² Brown, Collected Poems 224.
- ¹³ Brown, Collected Poems xii.
- ¹⁴ Francis Russell Hart, The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey (London, John Murray: 1978) 397.
- ¹⁵ Cairns Craig, Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and British Culture (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996) 36.
- ¹⁶ Cairns Craig, The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) 161.
- ¹⁷ Berthold Schoene, The Making of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose Work of George Mackay Brown (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995) 100-1.
- ¹⁸ Although rarely referred to in this thesis on account of its theoretical simplicity and bibliographical outdatedness, Alan Bold's early study George Mackay Brown (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1978) is perhaps the key work in this tradition. Indeed, much of Brown's own autobiography, For the Islands I Sing, can be read as a specific rebuttal to Bold's account of his work, notably in the discussion of Magnus, a novel Brown attempts to redeem against Bold's criticisms. A number of theses have followed on from Bold's work in their focus on Brown's rural or Orcadian identity, including John M. McGrath's The Orkney Tapestry of George Mackay Brown (MLitt Strathclyde 1980), David Annwn's Inhabited Voices: Myth and History in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney and George Mackay Brown (Frome: Bran's Head, 1984) and Rowena Murray's Style as Voice: A Reappraisal of George Mackay Brown's Prose (PhD Pennsylvania State 1986). Focus in this thesis is primarily on Annwn's and Murray's more recent – and ultimately more persuasive – accounts of Brown's work, while

Schoene's thorough reading of McGrath's thesis needs no further articulation. Please see Schoene's study, however, for a detailed account of all of these works, as well as several lesser secondary sources not discussed here. See also Spear's George Mackay Brown: A Survey of His Work and a Full Bibliography (NY and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000) for a complete listing of secondary criticism.

¹⁹ George Mackay Brown, For the Islands I Sing: An Autobiography, 1997 (London: John Murray, 1999) 186. Hereafter cited in text as *FI*.

²⁰ Support for this claim is easily found; in the introduction to his children's collection The Two Fiddlers: Tales from Orkney (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), for instance, Brown claims that: "in a small community, enclosed by sea and sky and fields, it is possible to see a man's life as a whole" (9).

²¹ Rowena Murray and Brian Murray, Interrogation of Silence: The Writings of George Mackay Brown (London: John Murray, 2004) 123.

²² Brown, Collected Poems xvi.

²³ Craig, Out of History 46. The complexity of Craig's views is not addressed in this thesis, primarily for reasons of space, and the thesis instead focuses on Craig's specific readings of Brown. However, while attempting to elide the nationalistic focus of Craig's reading of Scottish literature, the thesis is implicitly reliant on his idea, expressed most fully in The Modern Scottish Novel, of Scottish literature as a dialectic.

²⁴ Craig, Modern Scottish Novel 59.

²⁵ Craig, Out of History 105.

²⁶ Hart 201-2.

²⁷ Hart 205.

²⁸ Alan Riach, Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography: The Masks of a Modern Nation (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 4.

²⁹ Riach 19.

³⁰ The function of the idea of community in modern nationalism has been well documented by Benedict Anderson, who has influentially argued that such an imagining "makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly do die for such limited imaginings". Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1991) 7. Anderson's influential work has been dealt with extensively elsewhere, especially in the work of Cairns Craig, and can only be alluded to here.

³¹ Hereafter referred to within the text as "Douglas Brown" in order to avoid confusion.

³² George Douglas Brown, The House with the Green Shutters, 1901, ed. Cairns Craig (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2005) 4.

³³ Brown, The House with the Green Shutters 26, 33.

³⁴ See the discussion of Heidegger's "they" in chapter two.

³⁵ Craig, Modern Scottish Novel 48-9.

³⁶ Craig, Modern Scottish Novel 62-3.

³⁷ Brown, The House with the Green Shutters 80-1.

³⁸ Brown, The House with the Green Shutters 183.

³⁹ Craig, Modern Scottish Novel 63.

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- ⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 1953, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) 135.
- ⁴¹ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, A Scots Quair: Sunset Song, Cloud Howe, Grey Granite, ed. Tom Crawford (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1995) Sunset Song 24.
- ⁴² Gibbon, Sunset Song 119.
- ⁴³ Gibbon, Cloud Howe 139.
- ⁴⁴ Gibbon, Cloud Howe 159-60.
- ⁴⁵ Gibbon, Grey Granite 137.
- ⁴⁶ Craig, Modern Scottish Fiction 65.
- ⁴⁷ Craig, Modern Scottish Fiction 66-7.
- ⁴⁸ Craig, Out of History 48.
- ⁴⁹ Craig, Out of History 49.
- ⁵⁰ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, "Speak of the Mearns," Smeddum: A Lewis Grassie Gibbon Anthology, ed. Valentina Bold (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2001) 841.
- ⁵¹ Gibbon, "Speak of the Mearns" 852.
- ⁵² Gibbon, "Speak of the Mearns" 871.
- ⁵³ quoted in Hart 328. A 1967 essay on Derick Thomson also reveals Smith's debt to Derick Thomson's poem "Strathnaver". Iain Crichton Smith, Towards the Human: Selected Essays (Edinburgh: MacDonald Publishers, 1986) 104-5.
- ⁵⁴ Iain Crichton Smith, Consider the Lilies, 1968 (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987) 8.
- ⁵⁵ Smith, Consider the Lilies 101.
- ⁵⁶ Smith, Consider the Lilies 103-4.
- ⁵⁷ Although not discussed here for reasons of space, Smith's later novels, especially An End to Autumn (London: Victor Gollanz, 1978) and A Field Full of Folk (London: Victor Gollanz, 1982) continue this discussion in productive and disparate ways.
- ⁵⁸ Smith, Towards the Human 23-4, 26.
- ⁵⁹ Smith, Towards the Human 46.
- ⁶⁰ For a discussion of the relation of self and community in relation to Scottish literature, please see Craig's account of the work of John MacMurray in The Modern Scottish Novel, 89-91. Macmurray's notion of a Self constituted in relation to Other has many similarities with the work of Nancy discussed in greater detail throughout this thesis; a detailed comparison between the two thinkers is yet to be done.
- ⁶¹ Howard Caygill, "The Shared World – Philosophy, Violence, Freedom," On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy, ed. Darren Sheppard, Simon Sparks and Colin Thomas (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 21.
- ⁶² Jean-Luc Nancy, Being Singular Plural, 1996, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 2.
- ⁶³ Nancy, Being Singular Plural 185.
- ⁶⁴ Simon Malpas, "Touching Art: Aesthetics, Fragmentation and Community," The New Aestheticism, ed. John J. Joughin and Malpas (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003) 92-3.
- ⁶⁵ Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, 1783, trans. Paul Carus, translation revised by James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977) 107.

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- ⁶⁶ Henry E. Allison, Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense, rev. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004) 321.
- ⁶⁷ See Colebrook for a far more detailed account. Claire Colebrook, Philosophy and Post-Structuralist Theory: From Kant to Deleuze (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).
- ⁶⁸ Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 1781, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1990) 472.
- ⁶⁹ Kant, Prolegomena 53-4.
- ⁷⁰ Martin Heidegger, Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, 1991, 5th ed., trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 7.
- ⁷¹ Heidegger, Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics 191.
- ⁷² Heidegger, Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics 198.
- ⁷³ Heidegger, Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics 54.
- ⁷⁴ Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics 3.
- ⁷⁵ Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics 20.
- ⁷⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 1966, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 1973) 71.
- ⁷⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, Hegel's Logic, 1830, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 36. Italics in original.
- ⁷⁸ Hegel, Logic 35.
- ⁷⁹ Hegel, Logic 48.
- ⁸⁰ Hegel, Logic 51.
- ⁸¹ Jürgen Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays, 1992, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) 39.
- ⁸² Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 43.
- ⁸³ The term "Lifeworld" or *Lebenswelt*, comes from Edmund Husserl's *Crisis*, in which he argues that each individual experience is already intersubjective because we perceive the world through a pre-constituted systems of practices, a "pregiven lifeworld". Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, 1954, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) 103ff.
- ⁸⁴ Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 17.
- ⁸⁵ Peter Dews, Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory (London and New York: Verso, 1987) 220-1.
- ⁸⁶ Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 51.
- ⁸⁷ Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 43.
- ⁸⁸ Jürgen Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, 1976, trans. Thomas McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1979) 2.
- ⁸⁹ Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society 110-11.
- ⁹⁰ Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 157.
- ⁹¹ Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 178.
- ⁹² Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 186.
- ⁹³ Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society 4.
- ⁹⁴ Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act, 1981 (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002) 86.

⁹⁵ Jameson, Political Unconscious 86. For a variant reading of Jameson's work in relation to Brown, please see Schoene 17-28, in which he focuses on Jameson's account of historicity in the context of a discussion of David Carr, Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White, all of whom are discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁹⁶ Jameson, Political Unconscious 20. Italics in original.

⁹⁷ Fredric Jameson, A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present (London and New York: Verso, 2002) 28.

⁹⁸ Jameson, Political Unconscious 60.

⁹⁹ Jameson, Political Unconscious 117.

¹⁰⁰ Fredric Jameson. Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions (London and New York: Verso, 2005) 345.

¹⁰¹ Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future xii.

¹⁰² Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future 7.

¹⁰³ Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future 36.

¹⁰⁴ Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future 243.

¹⁰⁵ Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future 88.

Chapter 1

The Will to Primitivism: *Beside the Ocean of Time*

As is shown in the preceding pages, Brown's work can be profitably read as a response to enlightenment and post-Kantian metaphysics. If his work is "highly sophisticated and at the same time deeply naïve", as Tom Paulin claimed when judging *Beside the Ocean of Time* for the Booker Prize,¹ this comes from his simultaneous distrust and acceptance of the process of enlightenment. In much of his fiction Brown frames his exploration of the dialectic of individualism and community in a discussion of the nature of enlightenment and myth. Rather than advocating a pure return to myth, community or pre-enlightenment thought, Brown explores how these tropes can be made use of in the context of modernity. In his recent work on utopian fiction, Phillip E. Wegner summarises Slavoj Žižek as arguing that the "deep contradiction between universalism and particularism is not the consequence of a conflict between the values of the past and those of the modern [... but] 'constitutive' of modernity itself".² For Brown, this contradiction is *both* the consequence and a constituent part of modernity. What is at stake in his work is how, within modernity, it is possible to approach the divide between the individual and the communal, how it is possible to use the mythic past to explain the present and how one can retain useful aspects of metaphysical constructs in a contemporary paradigm. At the same time that his work displays a certain primitivism and naivety, then, it is also deeply forward-thinking: this chapter will show that Brown's response to enlightenment deserves careful consideration.

Brown's later work, especially *Beside the Ocean of Time*, displays many parallels with the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre. For MacIntyre, whose *After Virtue* is seen by Craig to be "among the most important interventions in our sense of Scottish culture in

the last quarter of the century”,³ one of the key effects of the enlightenment project has been the ongoing rise of the individual and the loss of community. This loss of communal contextualisation and social identity makes it impossible for moral referents to have any basis; as MacIntyre writes: “This democratized self which has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing”.⁴ It is only in the context of a communal identity that moral judgments can be made or assessed: the individual without a community has no basis for action. In his argument for an Aristotelian moral scheme, MacIntyre advocates a return, insofar as one is possible, to a notion of political community as that which is necessary for any individual moral decision-making. The moral individual can only be understood within the framework of the moral community; without community, the individual cannot fully be defined. Tradition and community, in the form of “my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations” in themselves constitute “my moral starting point”.⁵ As Craig points out, the community, whether moral or practical, is thus inherently bound up with history and tradition; it is only in the exploration of these latter aspects that community can begin to be approached, and only in the approach to community that the individual life can be understood. In many of his writings, Brown appears to follow MacIntyre’s schema: his writings present the life of the individual as facilitated and defined by the community, and the community as founded on history and tradition. In his continual reassessment of and praise for a world-view predicated on local community, Brown’s work parallels MacIntyre’s call for “the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be

sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us”.⁶ At the same time, however, Brown also examines the irrevocability of the enlightenment project and the impossibility of such a sustainable community: his work explores the tension between these two extremes, and at the same time that it displays an apparent pre-enlightenment thought also engages in the key questions of modernity.

In his 1977 children’s collection *Pictures in the Cave*, Brown tells the story of the Orkneys from Viking settlement to the present day.⁷ The book is an amalgamation of history and legend that focuses on one specific, presumably imaginary, location, a cave on the northwest corner of an unnamed Orcadian island. The cave is home to seals and beggars, Robert the Bruce and a German air-force pilot, but most of all it is a physical repository of the island’s stories, which Brown views as the core of the island’s culture. “When the stories are told no more, the island will be as lost as Atlantis”, mourns one character.⁸ As in MacIntyre, narrative is the way in which both the individual and society are understood: “It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others”.⁹ The stories of the community are integral to the community’s existence because stories themselves are the way in which lives are understood. As Páll Skúlason points out, the narrative dimension of thought cannot, after Hegel, be completely divided from a more philosophical approach: a human experience “is only to be understood as a segment of a saga”.¹⁰ Stories, or the rephrasing of experience in the form of stories, are that which allows any understanding of human experience. For Brown, these narratives are able to form the bridge between individual and communal life: while they may be about, and told by,

individuals, they have the power of integrating the individual within society. Brown places these stories in direct opposition to the concerns of modern education, in which history can be reduced to a series of memorisable facts: they instead exist in nonlinear time, so that as long as the cave exists and the stories are told, all of the lives contained within them are remembered and made vital.

Brown thus sets forth a divide between a view of history that is comprehensive and factual and one that is immanent, fragmented and experiential. Within his work, the former view is linked to enlightenment, while the latter is both mythic and hoped for. As in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History", the true articulation of the past in Brown's writing is not predicated on historical reality, but is instead "seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized".¹¹ Brown's cave is home to these flashes; it is a venue for those narratives which reveal the truth about the individual and the community without necessary basis in historical fact. In a collection such as *Pictures in the Cave*, the reader can easily access many of Brown's key theses on the value of storytelling: true stories are not those most closely related to history, but those which are most interesting; the most salient aspects of individual life are reflected in, and formed by, the place in which that individual dwells; the price of modernity is the loss of immanent history. The cave's ultimate destruction, similar to the disasters at the ends of *Greenvoe* and *Beside the Ocean of Time*, signifies the way in which "progress" – Brown's term for technology, enlightenment and modern life in general – attempts to destroy that which is of greatest value in the community, its defining narratives.¹² Within *Pictures in the Cave* Brown sets forth a paradigm of contemporary life very similar to

MacIntyre's: the consequences of enlightenment are unavoidable, but it is still worth arguing for something else, a version of history and experience found in stories and myth.

Alasdair Maclean dismisses the collection as "a constant rebuke to literary sophistication"; he argues that Brown writes with "the notion that one can will oneself into primitivism and that an abc sort of simplicity is the signature of it".¹³ The simplicity Maclean disdains lies in Brown's repetition of character and place, his one-sentence paragraphs and uncomplicated diction: the very properties, in short, which make him a popular writer. There is indeed little stylistic difference between *Pictures in the Cave* and a collection such as *Around the Orkney Peat-Fires*, a popular series of articles from "The Orcadian" which was reprinted throughout the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Although, as will be shown below, both Brown's prose and ideological stance are far less simplistic than they may appear in this volume, Maclean is correct in noting the appearance of an ideological agenda throughout Brown's writing. In *Pictures in the Cave*, as is more fully evidenced in a late work such as *Beside the Ocean of Time*, Brown is writing with the specific purpose of willing himself, and the reader, into an understanding of the value of primitivism; for Brown, the only way in which modernity can be understood is with respect to what came before. The "primitive" in Brown's fiction is connected to the mythic, the "rich squandered cargo" of time. To will oneself into the primitive is both to salvage the past and to use it to explain the present.¹⁵ Brown's work clearly invites a reading which focuses on this simplicity, a neo-Romantic reading in which Brown argues for a return to a Hegelian or metaphysical totality. Yet, as Jerome McGann has influentially argued about the Romantics themselves, it is ultimately necessary to read the work both through and against the apparent ideologies of

its creator. If Brown's late writing shares the "grand illusion" of the Romantic poets that "poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and culture",¹⁶ his underlying ideology must also be seen, following McGann's reading of Romantic ideology, as "historically specific in a crucial and paradoxical sense".¹⁷ Brown's work must also be read as fully engaging with aspects of modernity not in order to displace them, but in order to examine the ways in which the past is entwined within the present. Brown is a far more modern writer than his works, and most of his critics, would lead the reader to believe, insofar as his very notion of time and culture is shaped by modernity.

Brown's perspective in these two late works is thus markedly different from that displayed in a novel such as *Greenvoe*. While *Greenvoe*, as will be shown in chapter four, demonstrates the revealing potential of the impossible community, *Beside the Ocean of Time* attempts to show what lies at the heart of the community. The praise Brown gives to the primitive and the individual is not naïve, but is predicated on an understanding of the danger inherent in any simplistic view of the rural or local community. *Beside the Ocean of Time* presents a utopian vision towards which all of Brown's fiction has built: its focus on individual achievement and on the ties between past, present and myth embody all that his previous works have shown to be held within the framework of community. Within the larger body of his work the novel resonates with the heightened problematic nature of modernity he has previously foregrounded, but read alone it serves as an artistic credo. Without being ignorant of the way the world is, *Beside the Ocean of Time* simultaneously points to the way the world should be, and thus forms a succinct summary of his project throughout his long fiction.

The greatest value a foregrounded “primitivism” holds for Brown is the way in which it allows him to construct an omniscient perspective on the individual who is stranded in time. In Brown’s later, more clearly utopian work, a given person can only see him- or herself in the moment, but storytelling, in the hands of an individual artist, allows a glimpse of how the world looks “through the eye of the guardian heaven-appointed angel”. Halfway through *Beside the Ocean of Time*, Brown clearly sets out his reasons for writing not just the story of Thorfinn Ragnarson, the novel’s putative hero, but fiction in general:

The truth is, that while we are closed in by this muddy vesture of decay, the lives of many people, including ourselves, seem vain and futile and fleeting at last. We cling avidly, and often with despair, to the dust that is ourselves, knowing how soon it is to scatter to the twelve winds. [...] Every dance, every lifetime is unique, and that infinity of dances from every race and from every era, is of incalculable value, and comprehends the great ceremonial dance of mankind.¹⁸

Brown engages with primitivism and myth in order to contextualise the effects and artefacts of progress within the greater framework of all human life itself. This move from the particular to the universal appears to follow Hegel’s call for a view of history which eliminates the contingent and the subjective in favour of the absolute: “In history, we must look for a general design, the ultimate end of the world”.¹⁹ Hegel, like Habermas after him, argues that even if one cannot write from a wholly abstract point of view, it is still necessary to write as if such an abstraction were possible, to the end of reaching a totality or a whole. Indeed, for Habermas the notion of an ideal speech situation is predicated on the understanding that “convictions are formed and contested in a medium which is not ‘pure’ nor removed from the world of appearances in the manner of the platonic ideals”.²⁰ The “everlasting impurity” of the world requires the establishment of a possible abstracted perspective: the very decentring effect of

enlightenment necessitates the proposal of an ideal centre. Habermas goes on to argue that: “Even the decentered society cannot do without the reference point provided by the projected unity of an intersubjectively formed common will”.²¹ Even as he argues for a philosophy based in “the experiential context of lifeworld practices”,²² then, Habermas still insists on a “projected unity” in which human relations are automatically given. Brown employs such a perspective in his description of an angelic vision that sees life as “an immortal spirit that dances from birth to death, all the way, from before the beginning till after the end” (*BOT* 130). Even as humans “creep, stumble, march, follow plough and scythe, linger, hirkle on a stick”, it remains possible to posit still a unity between human lives that encompasses all life and time.

Any engagement with the universal or whole remains predicated on the individual, however. Sartre, for instance, finds such a Hegelian perspective regressive, arguing that: “if there is such a thing as the unity of History, the experimenter must see his own life as the Whole and the Part, as the bond between the Parts and the Whole, and as the relation between the Parts”.²³ In Brown, for instance, the angelic perspective only arises as part of the story of Thorfinn Ragnarson: the proposed abstracted totality can only be accessed through the individual and the subjective. The novel’s structure itself enforces this notion: whatever totality may be apparent, the reader is only given access to it through Thorfinn’s subjective experience. It is thus impossible for Brown, like many twentieth-century thinkers, to write as if a totality or a complete system of relationality can just be given: he instead focuses on the individual and the individual’s conflicts with others. As for Nancy, relationality itself, manifest as diversity, is the way in which totality can be approached: “The unity of a world is nothing other than its diversity”.²⁴

The tension between a desire for an Hegelian recourse to the spiritual sphere and holistic perspective and the recognition of the impossibility of such a regression dominates utopian fiction. *Beside the Ocean of Time* can profitably be read as an example of Jameson's understanding of the utopian "structural combination scheme" within which "we have the ultimate rebuke of the centered subject and the full deployment of the great maxim that 'difference relates' – one of the most vivid images of the collective in all its productive inner conflicts and compacts or conspiracies".²⁵ If, as Wegner argues, "narrative utopias serve as a way both of telling and of making modern history",²⁶ Brown's utopian vision allows a criticism of modernity and enlightenment that is nevertheless situated within a modern paradigm. As Ernst Bloch writes, it is impossible to separate utopian thought from the concerns of the present: "great art or great philosophy is not only its time manifested in images and ideas, but it is also *the journey of its time and the concerns of its time if it is anything at all*, manifested in images and ideas".²⁷ Even as his work ranges across time, Brown uses his fiction to document the concerns of the contemporary age: far from being a retreat from contemporary concerns, his fiction represents a continual engagement with the present as well as the past.

Brown's fiction utilises a dialectic of individualism to both utopian and potentially community-centred ends. While characters in his novels are often identified primarily by their trades, and are thus in a sense interchangeable, they are also portrayed as complex, distinct individuals whose lives achieve meaning both within and without the surrounding community. A given craftsman, for instance, achieves wholeness not through his own working of the land, but as part of a familial line of men who have worked the same land: individual worth is not determined in isolation, but through the

ways in which that individual serves as part of a community. Individuals are identified not just by name, but also by craft; Thorfinn's mother is not just Liza Ragnarson, but also "the wife of Ingle" (*BOT* 146). Identity, in Brown's fiction, is formed from the tension between the dominance of an individual life and the value that life holds within the community. Here Brown approaches a view of identity similar to that of both Nancy and Jean-François Lyotard, a perspective from which "a *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before".²⁸ In the chapter "A Man's Life", for instance, Thorfinn is surprised not at Jacob Olafson's death, but rather that "this old man was not part of the island anymore" (*BOT* 50). Individuals can be understood fully neither in isolation nor in a collective, but only in the tension between the two. In order to understand the ways in which Brown works through this dialectic, however, it is necessary to engage the conceptualisation of modernity popularised by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer propose a perspective wherein enlightenment is not regarded as an historical phenomenon, but is instead that which displays the tension between utopian striving and individual centring or domination. Adorno writes explicitly of the impossibility of a naïve return to a Hegelian totality in *Negative Dialectics*, where: "the matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality and particularity."²⁹ Individuality, rather than communality, is one of the dominant themes in modern thought, and any perspective on the tension between the two must take into account the necessary loss of unity that is revealed in Adorno and Horkheimer's account of enlightenment. This focus

on the individual drives Brown's work, and it is thus necessary to read a novel such as *Beside the Ocean of Time* not only through MacIntyre's vision of enlightenment, but Adorno's as well.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that enlightenment has no beginning: there is nothing that comes before it, for even myth, the default primitive state, already realizes enlightenment, just as enlightenment continually reverts to myth. Enlightenment "receives all its matter from the myths, in order to destroy them".³⁰ There is no possibility of enlightenment that completely supersedes or abolishes myth: such a view would only be possible if enlightenment could be viewed as an historical end in itself. Once enlightenment is seen as process and tension, myth must be seen not as an early stage in humanity which enlightenment can destroy, but the very core of that enlightenment. Enlightenment thought, herein viewed as the defining feature of modernity, is a process of separation: it is "the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy".³¹ It is also necessarily a process of the rise and centring of the individual. It is a self-defeating rise, however, for while the individual must combat external nature in order to preserve himself, he defeats inner nature in the process. As Jay Bernstein summarises Adorno's argument, in order to employ discursive reason, one must work towards "the inhibition and domination of drives and desires".³² This drive against nature in all its forms in order to establish the dominance of individual reason is the basis of enlightenment. Enlightenment is not only "the distinct representation of nature in its alienation", but also the very process of that alienation: "the decline, the forfeiture, of nature consists in the subjugation of nature

without which spirit does not exist”.³³ Enlightenment is thus a radical denaturing of the world and of the self.

Critically, there is no prelapsarian ideal inherent in Adorno and Horkheimer’s schema, no Edenic vision of untouched nature to which humans can return. Like both Nancy and Jameson after him, Adorno argues that the utopian vision cannot be grounded in a Hegelian totality, but is instead “a togetherness of diversity”.³⁴ Likewise, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer argue that there is no natural or whole basis for society or culture, but rather that culture has always been thus: culture is itself the denaturing of nature. The very notion of an autonomous individual or an autonomous, pre-existing nature is impossible, for they are mutually defined. For Adorno, there can be no return to a Hegelian totality or a Romantic envisioning of nature; it is not that the split between the human and the natural is irreparable so much as that our conception of the split is predicated on an impossibility, for the two are mutually defined. It is impossible to understand nature without first understanding society, for “nature is viewed by the mechanism of social domination as a healthy contrast to society, and is therefore denatured”.³⁵ Adorno does not accuse civilisation, as Rousseau does, for an accusatory stance assumes that it is possible to argue from outside civilisation, and that there is a known (even if only hypothetical) alternative. Instead, he attempts to understand society from within. Modernity is necessarily all-encompassing, and it is no longer possible to conceive of a battle pitched between the primitive and the modern, for the modern necessarily incorporates all that has come before.

A. Progress and Modernity

Brown, for all of his so-called primitivism, at times appears to accept the impossibility of such a divide. In a passage such as the following, it initially appears that Brown views progress as a means of alienation, as a system of that which is foreign:

Why should Orcadians not believe in Progress? – everything seems to insist on it. The stone cots of their grandfathers, where men and animals bedded down under the same roof, are strewn all about the parishes and islands, beside the smart modern houses of wood and concrete. The horses are banished, but then tractors and lorries are much less trouble, much more efficient. There is no real poverty any more; tramps and vagrants and tinkers are exiled with the horses. (Only the very backward farmers nowadays don't have a car.) Progress is a goddess who, up to now, has looked after her children very well.³⁶

Here, as elsewhere in his writings, Brown is using a very specific definition of progress. Progress is the technological arm of modernity, just as enlightenment, in Adorno's reading, is its intellectual arm. For all of the irony in this passage, Brown is also sincere, and in his later works he comes closer to accepting this view of progress as an inevitability. Progress cannot be countered. Neither progress nor enlightenment, then, can be viewed as relating specifically to a given historical period – and it is vitally important that the enlightenment discussed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not refer to one specific intellectual movement, but to an ongoing development in human ideology – but are instead best understood as measures of change. Brown's focus on progress, rather than modernity, allows him to revile the technological changes seen in Orkney society without discarding the other varied profits of modernity. As will be demonstrated below, Brown's depiction as a Romantic, supported by passages such as the above, is necessarily false: his protestations against the modern are able to take shape only because of the modern. Modernity, as viewed through the lens of progress, is not merely that which is opposed to nature; it is that which is inescapable. Modernity is the great governing

principle under which everyone lives. Even as Adorno and Brown in their disparate ways lament the passing of certain cultural institutions and ways of life, they both come to accept the relentlessness of modernity, whether in the form of enlightenment or progress.

In this respect they are out of step with what Marshall Berman regards as the “radical flattening of perspective” that takes place in the twentieth century, in which modernity is regarded as somehow distant from humanity, a force in itself. “Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt”,³⁷ claims Berman, but there is clearly a third option, present in the writings of Adorno and Brown, in which modernity, like or even as enlightenment, is understood not as an event but as a continuance. This understanding is in line with Berman’s conception of nineteenth-century dualism, in which modernity is viewed as both saviour and enemy. This exploratory excitement is revealed in the works of Karl Marx most especially, who wrote that:

everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. [...] The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. [...] All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force.³⁸

This Marxian distrust of progress, coupled with great curiosity about its yields, is in many ways similar to the approach of later writers such as Brown and Adorno. Indeed, Jameson has argued that: “Adorno’s Marxism, which was no great help in the previous periods, may turn out to be just what we need today”.³⁹ If this is true, it is because Adorno is not documenting the state of the world at the time of writing, as his laments about a specifically mid-century “culture industry” would seem to indicate, but rather the

state of the world in continual flux. Adorno can only be right in his conception of enlightenment if it is not a process which achieves its peak in twentieth-century fascism, but is instead the focal point of an unfinished modernity. Within Jameson's reading of Adorno, enlightenment, like modernity and progress, must be seen as "something like the 'inner truth' of earlier, slower, seemingly more representational cultures".⁴⁰ It is in this reading of Adorno that Brown's underlying ideology in novels such as *Beside the Ocean of Time* is revealed: for the concept of modernity to be valid at this moment, it must have always been valid, and for the "primitive" to have been true in some distant era, it must also be true now. Brown uses his novels to look to the past for a version of human life which is relevant to the present, rather than looking at it with nostalgia, and it is this crucial distinction which makes his work relevant to contemporary life.

In his more stridently utopian works, Brown argues against the creation of what Adorno and Horkheimer famously term "the culture industry", a confluence of powers which considers humans only as members of a species, without individual differentiation: "Now any person signifies only those attributes by which he can replace everybody else: he is interchangeable, a copy. As an individual he is completely expendable and utterly insignificant."⁴¹ Brown argues that individual worth, at both the level of the human and the isolated community, comes about both through its uniqueness and nonduplicability and through its value in the creation of a greater whole which is itself constituted in diversity. In his writings, individual worth on the human level is often grounded in childhood, and too often adults come to accept the culture industry and the processes of modernity. The role of stories in Brown's vision is to allow the reader to regain this childlike appreciation for dreams and visions and for the value of individual imaginings.

As seen above, Brown references a spiritual sphere to illustrate a utopian understanding of the world: “sometimes the ‘forefending angel warder’ sees the child and his images through the gray bleak time of adolescence, and guides him [...] out into the vale of soul-making, where dream and vision are still the master-light of all his seeing” (*BOT* 129). This “angel warder” is not only a spiritual guardian, however, but also all those, like Brown, who propose alternatives to enlightenment and progress and to the loss of individual value. Poetry and fiction, in Brown’s view, allow the individual to continue to live as an individual through their emphasis on historical storytelling and imagination. Brown begins to address the division between storytelling and history in his representation of modern education.

Brown represents the coming of intellectual enlightenment through his portrayal of education and the ways in which it distorts and deadens characters’ perceptions of the past. In *Beside the Ocean of Time*, Brown continually stresses the difference between learned history and lived (if historically-based) stories. Thorfinn Ragnarson, like Sigurd Bressay in *Pictures in the Cave*, is introduced in the process of skipping history lessons at school in order to fully immerse himself in these stories. Living with and through an imaginative history and engaging with it intimately makes Thorfinn, in the eyes of those around him, a “lazy idle useless boy [who is] too late to do [his] history lesson” (*BOT* 46). This idleness, for Brown, is commendable, for history as taught in a classroom setting is not only dull, but creates a distance between the listener and his or her own past. Brown consistently represents education as a force brought to the islands from the outside world: teachers arrive from the mainland, stay for a few years, and then depart; the recitation of places and dates which they encourage serves to make the local foreign.

Education is a force of distancing and removal; the forces of enlightenment are those which separate humans from their natural and historical contexts. Mr. Simon, the teacher in *Beside the Ocean of Time*, has “a way of making that exciting story dull, too”, whatever that story might be:

Mr. Simon thwacked the blackboard with his pointer. Battle of Bannockburn 1314 was chalked on the blackboard.
‘*Battle of Bannockburn 1314*,’ chanted the school children, over and over.
It was as dull as ditchwater. (*BOT* 21)

Education, for Brown, is a reductive force which takes lived experience and transforms it into rote learning. History, when taught in the classroom and memorised as a series of names and dates, loses all of its salience; it makes itself irrelevant, because there is no connection between what is taught and the day-to-day experience of those who learn it. When Mr. Simon plans a “special treat” for the children, a field-trip to a primitive castle or *broch*, the children are “bored stiff”: whatever relevance the *broch* has to their lives, its contextualisation in education makes it appear far duller than “the life of tiny crabs and molluscs and delicate frail blossoms of seaweed” (*BOT* 75-6). The minutiae of the natural world contain far more history, and more interest, than the stories of history when they are filtered through education and an outside voice.

The ambiguity of the context in which the events of history are placed is one of Brown’s primary concerns throughout his fiction. As Ian Campbell points out, the schoolmaster or “dominie” in kailyard tradition is often the narrative voice, the bridge between the remoteness of Scottish life and the reader.⁴² In a work such as Robin Jenkins’s *The Changeling*, a subtle reworking of that tradition, the schoolmaster Charlie Forbes is portrayed as delusional about his role in shaping the lives of the poor students, but is nevertheless the primary actor in their stories, the man around whom the lives of

the students coalesce. Education is a way into greater society, and a teacher, even one who is “conceited about his championing of people oppressed”, is the path into that society.⁴³ The schoolteacher is always an outsider both in terms of birth and culture, and as such he represents the outside world which the reader shares. Education forms an acceptable path to change because it leads “to advancement in a way which social and religious authorities condone”.⁴⁴ Education thus focuses on the individual, for the society in which it prepares one to live is the society of individuals: education creates the post-enlightenment world of individual dominance. In *Beside the Ocean of Time* Brown maintains the notion that education is both the path towards and the manifestation of enlightenment. Mr. Simon’s lessons directly inform Thorfinn’s fantasies: his Bannockburn reverie is not prompted by a natural experience, but by a lesson. While Brown postulates a divide between history as found in textbooks and stories which mirror that history but are only to be found in lived (or imagined) experience, the two continue to complement each other.

In this respect, Brown’s perspective on education can be considered to be somewhat Rousseauvian. A brief comparison with Jean-Jacques Rousseau is especially useful here for, as this chapter attempts to show, Brown’s work has often received similar simplistic, nature-centric readings as that of Rousseau. In *Émile*, Rousseau writes that: “education comes to us from nature, from men, or from things”.⁴⁵ As Keith Ansell-Pearson argues, the middle aspect of this becomes of greatest importance: societal education is that which provides a moral grounding: “we only become truly free and independent when we become moral beings united in society”.⁴⁶ Rousseau, in Ansell-Pearson’s reading, is not here arguing for a naïve return to nature, but instead “show[s] in

what way the social bond can lay claim to a legitimate hold on men's hearts".⁴⁷

Rousseau thus engages with the very tensions or antinomies which occupy Brown (and indeed MacIntyre, whose argument is at least in this respect somewhat Rousseauvian): those between society and nature, individuality and community, desire and reason. Nature in Rousseau's thought is not a pre-existing whole to which one could return, as thinkers from Nietzsche to Jonathan Bate have argued. Instead, as Julia Simon-Ingram argues, Rousseau posits a hypothetical state of nature from which humans emerge: the conception of a "natural man" allows the illumination of natural laws and rights.⁴⁸ This natural state may have never existed, but, as Ansell-Pearson points out, it is necessary to hypothesise such a state to explain the present human situation.⁴⁹ The will to domination that Adorno views as an enlightenment process is for Rousseau an outgrowth of social development: "the new enlightenment that resulted from this development [prudence] increased his superiority over the other animals by acquainting him with it. [...] The more the mind became enlightened, the more industry was perfected".⁵⁰ For Rousseau, enlightenment is a necessarily occurring process which arises from the natural instinct for self-preservation. Both Brown and Rousseau examine the way in which education serves to draw the individual out from nature into the social. For Rousseau, however, nature is limited to origin, while Brown finds nature to be no less originary, but also argues that it must be reconfronted on a daily basis so that the human templates of enlightenment and law can be continually reconsidered.

By opening up his notion of nature to include not just humanity's animal instincts, but all surrounding flora and fauna, Brown posits a natural world which stands in opposition to modern enlightenment. If, as Adorno argues, enlightenment is predicated

on the decline of nature – “the subjugation of nature without which spirit does not exist”⁵¹ – Brown explores a world in which neither enlightenment humanity nor nature is completely dominant. Brown achieves this most directly in his depiction of selkie culture: that which is wholly animal is also wholly human. Mara, in “The Press-Gang and the Seal Dance”, is no less a good (human) wife or mother for her longings to return to the sea as a seal. That the relationship between a selkie and a man is the most fully and compassionately drawn in the novel suggests that the human and the animal both thrive when they are closest together; it is only when humanity leaves the animal behind that problems emerge. What Rousseau sees as a development, then, Brown views as a divorce. Rousseau’s account of enlightenment, which Simon-Ingram summarises as: “[the] individual’s increasing feeling of helplessness as the domination of nature leads to a form of self-domination characterized by objectification and alienation”,⁵² is arguably for Brown a surmountable problem in a way it never is for Rousseau. In Brown’s fiction, the wilful refusal of enlightenment thought has the potential (admittedly almost never realised) to free humanity from that feeling of helplessness: Brown seems to argue, in passages such as the field-trip to the broch, that alienation and objectification can be overcome if people just spend more time observing the natural world. Even for Brown, however, this is not a completely satisfactory solution, and his later novels struggle with humanity’s actual inability to return to a natural state.

Read uncritically, this advocacy of a return to nature would indeed be troubling. Even within his discussion of education, however, Brown begins to allow himself a broader philosophical perspective than is at first apparent. Like Sir Walter Scott, Brown writes from a position which is both within and without the documented culture: he uses

his novels to introduce a somewhat alien world and society to the outside reader at the same time that he documents a particular version of the world around him. Just as Scott has been charged with “altering [...] or creating history to suit the needs of his plot”,⁵³ so too Brown posits an Orkney community which meets his philosophical needs. Brown must surely have been aware of his perceived role as cultural emissary, a man who, to quote an article on his Booker Prize nomination, “has moulded, to an almost awesome degree, outsiders' and natives' perceptions of those elemental northern islands”.⁵⁴ Brown has been viewed as a representative of the Orkneys, a man whose cultural role is to teach native life and stories to the outside world, and indeed even his autobiography begins with a discussion of the history and culture of the islands. If Brown’s putative role as a teacher is emphasised, there is, then, an implicit self-criticism in the novel’s dismissal of Mr. Simon and his “schoolroom voice” (*BOT* 2), and the beginnings of a recognition, never fully stated, that educational forms of history are not so far from imaginative stories as the rest of the novel supposes. In his focus on the primitive and the mythic, Brown uses history as an entry into the sorts of lived myths he prefers, so that the reader is not ultimately learning about the islands’ history, but through the novel finding a piecemeal sort of lived experience. Learned history, in Brown’s fiction, is always inferior to lived historically-based mythology, and it is this latter view of history which it is the poet’s duty to convey.

B. Modernity and the Individual

The structure of *Beside the Ocean of Time* is unconventional in the ways in which it blends fiction and history; it is in many respects a collection of stories, set across eight

hundred years, through which Thorfinn lives, stories in which he briefly immerses himself before returning the framework of the present. The stories are necessarily historical, but draw their strength from the imagination, and are most successful when they are farthest from conventional history, when they are, in Bernard O'Donoghue's phrase, "at the more fictional end of the historical-fictional continuum".⁵⁵ Thorfinn lives through episodes from Norday's past in a manner which combines dream and reality; he is a character in each episode, if not the hero, but the stories also arise out of his idleness and imagination:

As a matter of fact, Thorfinn at that very moment was on a Swedish ship, the *Solan Goose*, anchored off a port in the Baltic. The skipper, Rolf Rolfson, was making plans to meet the prince of Rus, with a view to trading with his people and establishing good relations.

It should be said that Thorfinn was actually in the barn of Ingle, lying curled in the bow of his father's fishing yole, with the collie Stalward sleeping in the stern. (*BOT* 4)

These two paragraphs clearly indicate that Thorfinn's journey is one of imagination, rather than an actual physical journey, but the use of the present tense for both, the balance of "fact" and "actually", signifies that the separation between historical or empirical truth and imagination is less important than the reader might suppose.

Thorfinn's historical experience, though couched in daydreams, is as relevant to the reader as if it was historical fact; what is important is the quality of enchantment that these stories contain. "The same ten or twelve stories, as the years pass, become ever more colourful and dramatic, so that it is hard in the end to recognize them from the bare original narratives; but the storyteller and his listeners are all the more pleased because of that" (*BOT* 62). Here Brown begins to engage with the individuation that enlightenment offers: the stories gain value through their appeal to the unique storyteller or listener.

This is one of the most modern aspects of Brown's text: although his stories themselves superficially advocate a return to an unenlightened primitivism, the appeal of the stories for a modern reader comes from their enlightenment context. Brown is not, as it might seem, arguing for a relative truth-value, one in which the truth of a story comes not from its relation to history but from the pleasure it gives the listeners. Instead, he is arguing that history is subservient to storytelling: the longest-lasting aspect of history is its very fictive quality. And yet that quality is still immersed in history, for it is its basis in a shared past that lends a story its meaning. In all of Brown's fiction (if sometimes more naively than others), stories are the vehicle for meaning and culture; they are the remnant of the primitive even as they are captured and dispersed through enlightenment means.

As Brown argues:

It is impossible to understand Orkney in any prosaic way, as many people try to do, by reading tables of statistics about egg production or population drift, concerned only with the here and now. Contemporary Orkney, cut off from the story of its past, is meaningless. The majority of Orcadians have a kind of reverence for their history, but it is a romantic reverence, for the witches, the press-gang, the smugglers, the salt-tongued ministers, the Hudson's Bay men, and above all for the Vikings; a kind of sentimental make-believe history, very different from the terrible and fruitful things that actually happened to our ancestors. (*OT* 27-8)

Brown does not deny the dialectic of modernity, the necessary entwinement of the primitive and the modern, but instead advocates the cultural weight of the mythologized past. In this passage, he also foregrounds his duality as insider and outsider, switching from "their history" to "our ancestors"; Brown continually examines the stories of the Orkneys both as a native and a medium to the outside reader. Brown's fiction thus forms a rebuke to the criticisms Samuel Johnson made of Scottish natives' "accounts of past times": "we soon found what memorials were to be expected from an illiterate people,

whose whole time is a series of distress”.⁵⁶ Brown’s primitivism is thus more nuanced than it might appear: he accepts the facts of history and modernity, as it were, but intentionally displaces them in favour of more germane stories. In so doing, Brown assumes the enlightened stance of his readership: the reader must be able to integrate history and myth in a way Brown refuses to do within the confines of his work. The elements of “make-believe” history listed above form a virtual précis of the stories told in *Beside the Ocean of Time*; these are the elements common to almost all of Brown’s works, and are thus central to the ways in which he wants his own experience and writings to be perceived.

It is tempting to assume that this replacing of an enlightenment “real” history with a “make-believe” one is Brown’s entire project, and it is to this end that Maclean’s criticism of *Pictures in the Cave* speaks. If Brown were merely arguing in favour of storytelling and against history, his would be an irresponsible project in the face of modernity. In later years, Brown himself admitted that he did not want to see works such as *An Orkney Tapestry* appear back in print, perhaps because of the force of his anti-modern rhetoric.⁵⁷ In his later work, modernity becomes a symbol of both destruction and hope. Thorfinn is drafted into the second world war, the island of Norday is paved and deserted, and money becomes far more important than land or community, all terrible and not apparently fruitful events. This very interest in “sentimental make-believe history” and the local, opposed to any focus on world events, dooms the islanders: they are unable to understand the events taking place around them and the larger power structures which have begun to interfere in their lives. The laird’s factor, Thomas Vass (seen earlier as a Liberal supporting free trade above all else), serves as the novel’s

representative of acquiescence to outside political forces: “‘The government!’ said Thomas Vass. ‘National security. Too intricate for the likes of you to take in. But don’t worry – never fear – you’ll be compensated beyond your wildest dreams. You’ll be the wealthiest men in Orkney’” (*BOT* 180). The inhabitants of Norday are unprepared for the rude introduction of modernity, seen here as both technological progress and sociological capitalism, and it is ultimately farmers, those people most closely linked to the land itself, whose lifestyle is most changed. As O’Donoghue points out, “The more secure the stake in the local economy, and the more ratified it is by nature, the more easily it is destroyed by the modern world”.⁵⁸ Even James MacTavish the publican, never presented sympathetically, is tragically forced to suicide by the newcomers; when his inn is no longer the only licensed property on the island, his life is made redundant. Each member of the community is identified by his or her occupation, and when those occupations are no longer necessary for the life of the community, the individual himself either dies or moves away.⁵⁹ This itself is a very real sort of history, for as the individual members of the community lose the stories about themselves, the ways in which they are defined by what they do within the community, they can no longer fully exist on the island. Here Brown’s dialectic of individualism comes to the fore: although the loss of occupation represents an archetypal loss, it also impacts named individuals. The separation between individual and communal value is consistently blurred, and it is only when modernity, in the form of this technological progress, becomes dominant that the individual is necessarily made distinct from his larger role in society. The military appropriation of the island brings great wealth - or at least its promise - to the islanders, but it strips them of their stories, and thus of the greater aspect of themselves.

In the chapter “Aerodrome”, twenty-one islanders are introduced in as many pages, as well as seals, dogs, hens and cattle, and Brown shows sentence by sentence how the ways in which each individual life is effected changes the whole community. Louis Stewart of Westvoe burns his farm, and sets his cattle to stampede into the sea, because no remuneration could match the worth of an eight-hundred-year-old farm: “Louis Stewart hadn’t thought about insurance – he nor his father nor his grandfather before him. In fact, he seemed to think that there was something wrong about defending a farm against tempest or fire with *money*” (*BOT* 188. Italics in original). For a farmer such as Stewart, it is better to destroy what you have worked to build rather than have it bought from you; as valuable as the land is in itself, its primary value lies in the communal history of its working. The individuals who suffer most are those whose history and stories are completely tied to the land and the moment. Ben Hoy, a retired ship’s engineer, is one of those shown in the greatest anguish, because his loss of Lookout Cottage strips him not only of his personal history, but of that of his ancestors: “the cry he vented after Ragna had read the [eviction] letter came from elsewhere. Ben Hoy, when he retired from the sea, had restored Lookout with his own hands. But his forebears had lived on the same site for generations” (*BOT* 184-5). Hoy’s cry is in effect the cry of all his forebears: he speaks not only for himself, but for all those who have worked the same land before him, and thus his grief is much greater than if it were purely individualised. These moments of despair are, crucially, the last the reader sees of Hoy or Stewart; they are not shown leaving the island, and Brown does not tell their stories afterwards, as he does with other characters, because, in effect, there are no stories left to

tell. When these characters are removed from their landed past they are groundless: a belief in stories is not enough for one to continue to exist in the modern world.

There are only two people on the island who are able to make good of the military's presence. Jimmo Greenay, the "poorest man in the island, beachcomber and rat-catcher [...and] a Tory" (*BOT* 22), becomes "the only happy man in Norday" (*BOT* 183) when the military arrives. He is content to eat the hot dogs and Coke he is given, despite not liking them, because his career, such as it is, is founded on being content with anything given to him. Jimmo is the man who also stays to bury the last of the island's dead when Norday is deserted, and it is in his dilapidated hut that Thorfinn finally resides. Jimmo adapts to modernity because he is almost literally a man without history, one who can adapt to each day's demands but seems to have no memory of the past, no family, no land of which to speak. His very status as an outsider allows him to view the military's arrival with less fear than the others, for he has less to lose. Systems of government make no difference to one as poor as Jimmo, and the loss of stories matters less to one who has no one to whom to tell them. This, too, is a despairing view of modernity; although Jimmo survives the invasion of global progress better than others in the novel, his is not a life to which anyone would aspire. However, in the final portrayal of Thorfinn Ragnarson's return to the island, Brown's final understanding of entwinement of modernity and enlightenment, myth and history begins to become clear.

Thorfinn is also a necessary outsider. The "laziest and most useless" (*BOT* 1) of all the boys on the island, his life is never grounded in land or occupation: he is instead only a "stumbler into time" (*BOT* 131). In an omitted passage at the end of "A Man's Life" Thorfinn's father, Matthew Ragnarson, asks, "'What would happen here when there

was only a dreamer to inherit”⁶⁰ Thorfinn’s return to the island marks its apparent demise, for the land and instantiated community are no longer present: the island is both deserted and paved, the houses have fallen apart, and above all, there is no communication, and thus no stories, no continuance of history. Thorfinn, however manages to tie all the various strands of the novel together: by watching others over the course of time, much like the neo-Hegelian angel discussed above, he is able to keep the myriad traditions alive. He is first shown on his late-life return to the island repairing Jacob Olafson’s boat, the Scallop, last seen in “A Man’s Life”, and also observing the same “fringes of seaweed and rock studded with limpets” which capture the children’s attention in “The Broch”. The sustaining tasks he has not learned himself he still remembers through blood and ancestry:

The man has worked creels, in a way, a long while ago, but then only as a boy who had come to bail and tie lobster claws; and then little was expected of, or hoped for, a dreamer like him. ‘Ah well,’ says the man to the mournful fog-lost bird, ‘let’s hope the blood of a few generations remembers...’ (*BOT* 194)

All of Thorfinn’s dreaming enables him to carry on the life of the island, even in solitude, in a way no single member of the community could have done before. His return marks an escape from the twin horrors of war and urban dwelling in Edinburgh, and thus could be seen as a willed primitivism. At the same time, his ability to instantiate historical traditions within a modern context allows the reader to approach history and modernity as processes which are indefinable without the other. It is not that a dreamer inherits the land, but rather that all of the dreams and stories, the histories real and imagined, allow him to live in the land practically and fully. Thorfinn’s remove from society enables him to continue past traditions with a knowledge of the present. Crucially, he does not end the novel in solitude. Sophie, the minister’s niece who first labelled Thorfinn a poet, has

also returned to the island, and the two begin a family, one in which land and stories will begin to merge again. The experience of modernity, then, has not destroyed the past, only forced it into new perspective.

Various critics have argued that the end of the novel is implicitly autobiographical, a way for Brown to justify his own departure from Edinburgh and return to Stromness, where he lived alone as a writer for close to half a century.⁶¹ Certainly the Edinburgh “treadmill existence” represented in the novel bears marks of Brown’s own experience, and the novel which pushes Thorfinn to success, focusing on “the impact on a primitive simple society, close to the elements, of a massive modern technology”, is strikingly reminiscent of *Greenvoe* (BOT 214). There is, too, a lament about the topics on which Brown focuses throughout all of his writing: “Who nowadays is interested in the life of a poor islander, who has been here and there about the world and is not very popular with his neighbours and has no particular insights or skills, and has achieved nothing particularly worthwhile?” (BOT 213). This reads as a *précis* not only of *Beside the Ocean of Time*, but of Brown’s autobiographical writings as well. While it would be short-sighted to simply accept Brown’s repeated assurances that his work is not autobiographical, however, it is possible to see how *Beside the Ocean of Time* has been reworked to make it less so. In the first draft of “Fisherman and Croftswoman”, Thorfinn is shown writing the earlier chapter “The Broch” and indeed the whole novel at hand: “Later in the [Thorfinn’s] novel, the story of the broch will be paralleled by the occupation of the island by the Royal Air Force in 1938-45 [...] but that will only happen many chapters on”.⁶² This self-referentiality is removed from the final draft, however, and Thorfinn is instead shown:

trying to dredge something rich and strange out of the mythical past of the islands – the selkies who shed their coats on the moon-blached sands and danced; the trows who live under the green knolls and love above all the music of men [...]. And so there is great mystery in this connection between music and death and time and the food that the earth yields for the nourishment of men... (BOT 209)

In this shift between the two drafts, Brown moves towards a more universal mode of representation: *Beside the Ocean of Time* cannot best be understood as closing the story of the Orkneys, but instead opens it up to include the entire world. By deflecting real history and focusing on myth, Thorfinn – here apparently standing in for Brown in philosophical leanings, if not in fact – makes the stories of the islands more accessible to those outside that culture.

C. The Embrace of Enlightenment

Brown's exploration of the tension between enlightenment and myth allows him to focus on the way in which the modern individual returns to myth *qua* myth. For MacIntyre, pre-enlightenment poetry portrays: "a society which already embodies the form of epic or saga. Its poetry articulates its form in individual or social life".⁶³ In *Beside the Ocean of Time*, Brown portrays a move in the opposite direction, in which the individual and social begin to articulate what is already found in poetry and myth. In Brown's discussion of modernity, myth can re-enter modernity as a gesture towards universality: history is isolated, but myths and stories, in stretching that history out, incorporate more aspects of the world than are approachable from the perspective of the enlightenment individual. This is in keeping with a reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which establishes a causal link between myth and enlightenment; in such a reading: "myth is itself historical, the result of an early process of enlightenment [...]" and contains

within itself the possibility of enlightenment”.⁶⁴ Alexander Duttman ties this causal reading with Adorno’s work on opinion and exaggeration. While Adorno argues that exaggeration has the potential for delusion, it also has the potential for truth, for: “all thinking is exaggeration, in so far as every thought that is one at all goes beyond its confirmation by the given facts”.⁶⁵ Given Brown’s earlier arguments that historical veracity is nothing compared to engaging storytelling, and that the truth of myth is as close to an eternal truth as the truth of history, the argument found in Adorno that “only in the movement of exaggeration [...] is thought capable of aspiring to truth”⁶⁶ is born out by Brown’s wilful mythologizing of his own past. A purely autobiographical text (as Brown portrays Thorfinn’s authorship of a markedly *Greenvoe*-like novel) fails to travel as far, or to be as close to truth, as the exaggerated thought, the mythologized form of history. By adhering to a mythological perspective at the close of *Beside the Ocean of Time* Brown does not rule out enlightenment, but instead makes his novel more universal even as it engages with the inescapable Adornian dialectics presented in contemporary life. The solution to the disaffection caused by modernity and the displacement which drives the islanders out of their homes and out of the story is to find the universal in the particular and to place the particular back within the context of the universal. It is for this reason that Brown shies away from autobiographical interpretations; for the novel to be successful, it must incorporate not just the life of Brown himself, but also apply to the lives of all humanity.

Brown uses the final chapter to explore the limits of fiction in portraying both linear and nonlinear time. The novel’s title fluctuates in the manuscript between “Beside” and “By the Ocean of Time”, which is itself the title of a chapter in Thomas

Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which Brown called in a 1984 interview "a wonderful book."⁶⁷ Mann's novel, concerned in part with the effect of encroaching modernity, tells of the ways in which the novel can incorporate different sense of time to the extent that time becomes the novel's subject, rather than a means through which story is revealed:

I am speaking of cases where the story practices a hermetical magic, a temporal distortion of perspective reminding one of certain abnormal and transcendental experiences in actual life. [...] Thus, or in some such way as in these sinister [opium-derived] dreams, can the narrative go to work with time; in some such way can time be dealt with in a tale. And if this be so, then it is clear that time, while the medium of the narrative, can also become its subject.⁶⁸

For Brown, as for Mann, one of the ways in which a novel can confront modernity is by making time itself the focus of the work. The various episodes in *Beside the Ocean of Time* are not just set in different moments in history, but are themselves concerned with the ways in which those moments collide. Thorfinn, as shown above, occupies multiple epochs, and those episodes set in the past are no less present in the imagination of either Thorfinn or the reader for their apparent distance. Although all of the islanders live with remnants of the past that intrude into their daily lives, the novel is the only way in which all of those moments can be accessed at once, made simultaneously visible. The novel, historically tied to the Enlightenment both technologically and ideologically, becomes a tool by which the past is made not only more visible, but closer to the moment in which it is read. From this perspective, Brown becomes much more welcoming of both the content and act of writing over the course of his work. Whereas in *Greenvoe* writers and their technologies - especially typewriters - are viewed with suspicion ("How the hell," said Ivan Westray, 'can a man write a book about a place if all he does it sit on his arse at a typewriter?'"⁶⁹), by the time Brown writes *Beside the Ocean of Time* the gift of a typewriter is seen as a marvellous thing, an object of progress which unites different

cultures and times. The typewriter is not an object of distancing, but instead allows the writer to draw different strands of time together. The novel becomes a means of dissemination: it prevents the subject matter from being memorialised only and lets it be re-experienced in the present. Those works which would initially appear to be monuments to the past become a way of keeping that past vital; for as one reads such a work the events portrayed in it become newly present and, hopefully, newly relevant. The role of the novel in modernity is to simultaneously preserve the past and to make it tangible to the contemporary reader. In the words of Major Schneider, the kindly commandant who gives Thorfinn a typewriter while he is kept prisoner in Stalag 29B, “there are not enough poets in the world” (*BOT* 202). The job of the poet is to unite the past and the present, and thus avert “the apocalypse, when all the old values are consumed in flames” (*BOT* 206).

In this way, Brown situates the life of the poet in what Adorno and Horkheimer would describe as an Odyssean paradigm. In their recasting of the Siren episode, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the appeal of the Sirens is “that of losing oneself in the past,” but while the Sirens “know all that has happened, they demand the future as the price of that knowledge”.⁷⁰ Odysseus here represents the enlightened individual, and by refusing the Sirens’ call he forces them into a mythic prehistory and renders them inconsequential to modern life. The enlightened self seeks linearity and causality in time; that is, the goal of the individuated self is to use the past as practical knowledge (in Rousseauvian terms, to use the past as a means to self-preservation). This *telos* runs contrary to art and history, which are the mediums through which “what is gone [is rescued] as what is living instead of using it as the material of progress”.⁷¹ Art and history, then, serve to

make the past present, rather than distilling it into some workable knowledge. The Sirens' appeal is that of art and history, and it is against those means of representation that the enlightened self must struggle. Enlightenment, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is the process of defining the past as knowledge. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this becomes a paradigm of domination, a representation of the way in which domination over nature cannot be achieved without concurrent self- and social domination. As Simon Jarvis articulates, power over nature, which is the true sign of enlightenment, is paid for by the blanket acceptance of those social systems which permit that domination to take place.⁷² Odysseus is here individualised by his role as the oppressor, and thus the entry-point into modernity (for regardless of Homeric intention, it is necessary for Adorno and Horkheimer's interpretation that this refusal to answer the Sirens' call marks the Sirens' last hour).⁷³

The will to domination, however, is not the only possible focal point of this interpretation of the Sirens.⁷⁴ While Adorno and Horkheimer focus on the ways in which the episode stresses Odysseus's rise to dominance, they elide the central notion that, if it is true that "the allurements of the Sirens remain superior",⁷⁵ then Odysseus, although he physically escapes, bears with him that same knowledge of the past they hold out. Odysseus is able to take hold of the pleasures of art and history and bring them with him into modernity without discarding the promised benefits of enlightenment. The significance of Odysseus's triumph over the Sirens is not only that he learns domination of self, nature and others, but that he is able to amalgamate the mythic, nonlinear, prehistorical notion of the past with the linear, enlightened notion of progress that lies at the centre of any conception of modernity. While Habermas is able to reduce the

argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to the rather crude paraphrase: “reason itself destroys the humanity which it had made possible in the first place”,⁷⁶ there is surely a more germane interpretation of Adorno and Horkheimer’s work. Although the Enlightenment necessarily brings with it the rise to self-domination, it also allows the individual to carry the trace of history in a manner not available to the primitive collective. Odysseus alone among humanity hears the promises of the Sirens and survives, which puts him in the unique position of having all possible perspectives on the past open to him.

This ability to live both within and outside of time is, for an author like Brown, the central aspect of being a poet. There are certainly dangers inherent in this approach. As Christopher Nealon argues, the work of those poets who accept the totality of modernity yet also hold to the mythic invites the reader “to take up a polemic affection for the obsolete, misguided, or trivial”.⁷⁷ The poet who, like Odysseus, merges the past and present runs the risk of oversentimentality, of looking to the past not for self-preservation but for nostalgia. This is clearly the perspective taken by Maclean in the above-mentioned review of *Pictures in the Cave*: the primitivism he finds in Brown’s work is unwelcome because it is non-productive. A more useful combination of myth and modernity comes from those writers who examine the past not as the past as such, but as the vestiges of myth of which enlightenment makes use. As shown above, the examination of history as such does not interest Brown; instead, it is the ability to use both factual history and historical imaginings to illuminate the present which lies at the centre of his fiction. The Odyssean figure - for Brown, always the poet – becomes notable not for his domination of self and others, but for his mastery of both the past and

present and those states of intellectual development which they represent. In gaining control over time, he is able to liberate the tropes of myth and enlightenment from their linear grounding and surpass the popular conception of the primitive and mythic elements of humanity as being lost in a vague, unreachable past. If the poet takes the lessons of the past and leaves them as they are, the work becomes nostalgic and sentimental. By transforming the salient aspects of history into myth, however, the poet is able to incorporate them fully into modernity. Although it is easy to read Adorno and Horkheimer's metaphorical interpretation of *The Odyssey* as an ur-enlightenment text, it is dangerous to do so, for even in their interpretation it is possible to see the ways in which the pre-enlightenment *mythos* is carried on in the enlightenment project.

As well as focusing on the poet's singular ability to incorporate historically-derived myths within modernity, Brown also stresses the ways in which the apparently tragic elements of modernity can benefit the individual as poet. The very acts which cause the island to be deserted, and which Thorfinn mourns, are those which enrich his writing. In his original notes for Thorfinn's return, Brown set out a string of changes to the island more in keeping with the changes that have taken place in the Orkneys since the war: the crofts have grown derelict and been absorbed into larger farms, the church only has a visiting minister, the Hall has become a youth hostel.⁷⁸ In the final version of the novel, however, none of these changes have taken place; the land is instead utterly deserted with the exception of Thorfinn and Sophie. This is, then, an almost literal return to an uninhabited Eden, a land in which one couple has the ability to change the destiny of their environment, to create new occupancy. This is the danger in Brown's vision: by choosing only certain elements of the past with which to work, and exaggerating those,

he finds himself in a position in which denying history entirely serves his novel best. The rewards of enlightenment are only visible when the destruction it has wreaked is most apparent, the ability to create only fully revealed when all the rest is void. If read literally, there is a distinctly anti-humanist strain in such imaginings, for it appears that in order for a poet to emerge the rest of the world must be destroyed. However, Brown's work can be understood to be less misanthropic if Thorfinn is conceived of within the Odyssean paradigm; in order to fully approach the entwinement of myth and enlightenment, the poet must be set at a remove from the rest of the human community. The silence in which poems are formed becomes the silence of shutting out the culture industry; the hope expressed at the end of *Beside the Ocean of Time* is the hope that modernity is itself surpassable.

The hope with which Brown ends the novel is made most apparent when it is contrasted with *The Golden Bird*, a far more pessimistic novella dealing with the arrival of modernity in the islands, written seven years earlier.⁷⁹ Two parallel stories, that of a feud between the crofts of Gorse and Feaquoy and of the education of John Fiord, serve to illustrate the thesis that, while the islanders are grounded in the past, the processes of modernisation only serve to harm them. The islanders live in a "willed harmony" which the arrival of outsiders and technology disrupts; for Brown, the arrival of modernity negates the very existence of the island community. Fiord begins the novel as an infant in a mythic past: he is captured by an eagle which is then fought off by his mother, and he bears the scars for the rest of his life. From that time forth he is known as "Eagle John", and he is kept as something apart from the islanders: he is a peacekeeper between the divided crofts, but also the one student who embraces education. He picks up "all the

offered branches of knowledge with effortless ease”,⁸⁰ and finds his community not in the keeping of his own croft, as his parents do, but in reading the *Orkneyinga Saga*. In this reading he comes to believe that Orkney is not “a backwater in the great ebb and flow of world history”, but that “the magnificence of history” has “seeped and sought down into the present” (GB 51). In his education in Aberdeen, John Fiord is made “part of the new wave of enlightenment, prosperity, and progress that is breaking upon the world” (GB 57), and it is this new wave of progress which he preaches to his students when he returns to the island as a teacher. Yet, much like Mr. Simon in *Beside the Ocean of Time*, he teaches the children rote memorisation of names and dates, and is viewed as even more of an outsider because he comes from the community; in a strict sense, the perspective he shares is not native to him, and acts as a force of estrangement. Unlike any other character in the novella, John Fiord lives with a teleological purpose: ““I see it as my duty””, he tells his students,

‘to put a new richness into your lives. Beyond this little stagnant pool lie the wonders and delights of Western Civilization, which is our heritage as well as the heritage of those who live in cities. I will lead you – it is my duty – into this marvellous region. But first of all we have to prepare ourselves – we have to yolk ourselves to the disciplines of word and number – we have to recognize that we are not isolated here in a little backwater, but that we too have a part in time and in place: which is to say, I have to teach you first of all the rudiments of history and geography’. (GB 96)

In his dependency on progress and his love for the “delights of Western Civilization”, Fiord is forced to renounce his own heritage. When questioned about the scars from the eagle talons, he tells his students that: ““it is precisely that kind of superstition that keeps us sunk in our brutishness and ignorance”” (GB 103). He denies the entire story of his infancy, presented quite factually earlier in the novella, because the story is itself unreasonable. Fiord is the new self-made man, one who has stripped himself of a

specific, pre-modern heritage in order to bring his community, and himself, into modernity.

His attempt fails, however. Fiord is rejected by his lady-friend in Hamnavoe, presumably for being too parochial, and when he woos his only friend on the island, Sunniva Sinclair, a deaf and mute student, he is ignored by her as she turns her focus to small local tragedies. Fiord's enlightenment project wins him neither the respect of his students, nor the love of a woman, nor a place in the community. He is tormented by the images of daily life in the community, the fish and the rose, and even when he begins to relent, letting the children gather shells about the island instead of staying in the classroom, he is unable to convince anyone in the island that modernity is something to be desired. At the novella's end, as Matthew Flett, the heir to the Gorse croft, dies on account of his new motorised fishing boat, Fiord is "left alone". Progress, enlightenment and education are all wasted, because they are not forms of knowledge which can be transferred to the community, but are only the domain of the individual. Rather than separating himself out from the mass in order to dominate them, as we see Odysseus do, Fiord is himself dominated by his separation. This is the negative aspect of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* identified by Habermas: reason, in its advent, destroys both itself and the reasoning individual. Maura Nolan, in her reading of Adorno, focuses on the liberating aspects of the disjunction between the diachronic and the synchronic: the incompatibility of these two ways of viewing time provides "a potential for freedom from the strictures of linear historicity".⁸¹ This freedom, however, is crippling to the individual who holds it and yet tries to integrate himself within a community bound within the synchronic. The community itself is no great place: the islanders are petty and bitter, gossiping and

wilfully ignorant, but to be left outside of it is even worse. If Brown has a moral in this tale, it is that nature is not only a force against which the islanders struggle, but a force that inevitably wins. The fruits of enlightenment are of no use to the individual who continues to attempt to ground himself within a world governed by the combination of the natural and the mythic. Fiord was spared from the eagle as a child, but never truly re-enters the community from which he was grasped, just as Matthew Flett's motorboat fails to keep him safe from natural forces. Fiord's special status as a made outsider, an islander who has received his glimpse of modernity elsewhere, permits him to see the necessity of enlightenment, but his own self-fashioning is unable to help the larger community. Following Adorno and Horkheimer's discussion of the Sirens, Fiord is an Odysseus who is able to resist the Sirens' call but cannot prevent his men from following; the resistance of one man is ultimately valueless. Even as glimpses of modern life appear in the story – automobiles, cigarettes, vegetarian socialists – the islanders are unable to see past their small joys and disappointments, and this is why nature defeats society and, as Jay Parini writes, "is contrasted with the flux of brief, difficult lives".⁸² Individuals cannot survive in the community, but neither can the community survive in its premythic state: it is only nature, the one constant, which prevails.

The inhabitants of the island as portrayed in *The Golden Bird* truly are willed primitives: they intentionally remain ignorant of the outside world. The definition Adorno and Horkheimer provide of Greek religion is applicable here:

Everything unknown and alien is primary and undifferentiated: that which transcends the confines of experience; whatever in things is more than their previously known reality. What the primitive experiences in this regard is not a spiritual as opposed to a material substance, but the intricacy of the Natural in contrast to the individual.⁸³

In the pre-enlightenment community, traditions are often upheld for their own sake, and influence from the outside cannot be taken into consideration. These communities, be they Greek or Orcadian, fail to separate out the practical benefits of enlightenment from its damaging elements. It is this lack of differentiation which dooms the islanders: they are unable to see either the good modernity may contain as well or its ills. The islanders also fail to make the crucial differentiation between technological progress and intellectual enlightenment, a distinction Brown himself tends to ignore in some of his early work. The arrival of an educated man and of an automobile are one and the same, and by tying together various strands of modernity in order to fully ignore them, the islanders damn themselves. Above all, *The Golden Bird* is the story of the death of a community as represented by the deaths of its individual occupants. The novel is filled with deaths shocking and mundane, funerals revelatory and tragic, but there are always “more deaths than births in the valley”. Each death, too, is the death not only of an individual but of all that they represented within the community:

And sometimes, if it chanced to be the last old man or old woman in a croft, the door was closed for ever. The hearth-fire that had never gone out for maybe a hundred years was gray peat-ash. Kettle and pot rusted. Rain dripped from the thatch. The curtain across the bed rotted. The wood of rafter and table began to warp slowly. A roofing stone might fall and smash in the narrow alley between house and byre. (*GB* 58-9)

Nature here reclaims both land and people; it is the only outside force which works in the islanders’ lives. Although the rise to domination of an individual fails to affect the community, the death of an individual becomes the death of all. Brown is not stinting in his criticism here: modernity is the cause of the community’s collapse, to be sure, but the community’s resistance to modernity also hastens their end. There is, in short, no way out for the members of such a community: nature cannot be dominated, nor can

enlightenment succeed, and as outside forces begin to encroach, the community has no choice but to disband. The novella is a cautionary tale about the perils of enlightenment, for both those who embrace it and those who reject it are equally damned. Death is inevitable; modernity only hastens it.

From this rather pessimistic background, it becomes possible to see how Brown, in his final novel, comes to a tentative peace with modernity. *Beside the Ocean of Time* contains none of the bitter irony of *An Orkney Tapestry* or the despair of *The Golden Bird*; instead, it accepts the arrival of progress, and even the destruction of community, with great sadness, but with the residual hope that something good can come of it. This good is immediately presented as creation and poetry: spurred by death and silence, the poetry of Thorfinn's expected son promises be as close to perfection as possible. Yet it is possible to see how Brown's readers could question this peacemaking – surely it is not worth the destruction of a community to create a few truly worthwhile poems? Brown would surely agree. What he injects into this discourse, though, is an implicit concept of “substitution”.

The Arabist Louis Massignon, towards the end of his life, founded a Christian community called Badaliya, its members centered around the principle of substituting themselves for others. Giorgio Agamben, in his discussion of community, focuses on the second principle of substitution, which is hospitality:

substituting oneself for another does not mean compensating for what the other lacks, nor correcting his or her errors, but *exiling oneself to the other as he or she is* in order to offer Christ hospitality in the other's own soul, in the other's own taking-place. This substitution no longer knows a place of its own, but the taking-place of every single being is already common – an empty space offered to the one, irrevocable hospitality.⁸⁴

The empty space in which each being has her taking-place is, for Brown, the space of enlightenment. The devastation of Norday then, is not the result of a tragic modernity, but the opening up of a new community. The poet, for Brown, stands in and substitutes for, all of humanity, both as it is and as it should be: the return to Norday is not an escape, but the means for the emergence of poetry. In Brown's vision the rise of modernity does not make up for the losses it entails, but is salvaged by the creation of a shared common space, which is human life. What the poet does is to accept the travails of enlightenment and mythology at the same time, to take them out of their own places, their own eras, and in doing so to make them newly whole.

Brown's poet is thus a messianic figure as much as an Odysseusean one, for the rise to domination serves in his vision to aid the rest of humanity. The poet thus serves to unite modernity with the conception of God found in Ecclesiastes, which moves Thorfinn "in spite of himself": "I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever. [...] That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past" (*BOT* 48). The imbalance between the diachronic and the synchronic becomes fruitful in Brown's late vision, for they can be conjoined within the perspective of this (by now rather mystical) poet. The poet, in this glorified standing at which Brown hints, cannot fight enlightenment, for enlightenment is the very process which allows the poet to recognise himself as such. In the isolated, individualised work of the writer, however, there is a substitution for the community which came before. There is no true will to primitivism left for Brown, because such a will would deny the world as it is. Instead, there is a will to substitution and amalgamation, a will to carry forward pre-enlightenment ideals into the present, and to carry the enlightenment process back into

the past. While in isolation this vision of the poet cannot but be seen as strained and somewhat ludicrous, Brown attempts to excuse it by having placed Thorfinn in the most ordinary of circumstances, both in the present actuality and in his past imaginings. The intermingling of myth and enlightenment in order to make a new whole becomes more immediately palpable because the poet in whom this combination occurs comes from the most ordinary means. Thorfinn, a reduced man living on a reduced island, cannot solve the problems of modernity any better than John Fiord could, but in his poetry, and especially in the awaited poetry of his son, he can make modernity into a new thing altogether, a process that moves backwards and forwards in time, untouched by the “bright finger” of apocalypse.

Beside the Ocean of Time is thus a utopian text both in its engagement with modernity and the possibility it raises for something better. Brown is in certain respects an heir to Ernst Bloch, himself a “decisive influence” on Adorno.⁸⁵ In his essay “Karl Marx, Death, and the Apocalypse” Bloch questions the individualisation which enlightenment yields, yet also accepts that it is finally the only way forward:

Does not a great inwardness, which traversed the self-encounter in ever rising loops, ever higher levels of integration, reduce precisely the simple power to turn back *socially*, to do right in politics, and to think? [...] But it is no less essential that we kindle a light before our feet. Precisely the one who was a thousand steps ahead can help more easily and closely than someone who blindly gasps along or adds his voice to the currently feasible.⁸⁶

What the poet must do, for both Bloch and Brown, is “to shape a path from the lonely waking dream of inner self-encounter to the dream that goes out to shape the eternal world”.⁸⁷ The process of enlightenment, the birth to domination of the individual, the mastery of nature and the negation of community – these are all presented throughout Brown’s work as great horrors. At the end of his life, however, he accepts not only their

irrevocability but also their opening of the world. Brown himself writes from an enlightenment perspective, however unwillingly, as do to a certain extent all novelists, even those who profess to write against modernity and progress. And thus *Beside the Ocean of Time* becomes an attempt to finally accept the irrevocability of enlightenment, to understand that the individual shaped by modernity is the one who will shape the world. This is far from an embrace of modernity, but is instead an acceptance that it has formed both the author and reader, that it is impossible to approach a text, or a community, from an anti-enlightenment perspective. Brown also at this point fully accepts the dialectic of enlightenment and *mythos* and the self-reflexivity with which they must be approached. There can be no will to primitivism, then, because that very act of willing oneself into something that is no longer present requires the individuation of the self which enlightenment has produced.

There is, finally, no clear-cut border between enlightenment and primitivism in the works of Brown. There is, instead, a pervasive desire to stretch the boundaries of our understanding, to force the reader to work outside the bounds of linear time. *Beside the Ocean of Time* is thus a successfully utopian novel because the very act of reading it forces the reader to reconsider modernity itself. The novel takes the reader out of her own perspective in order that she may re-evaluate the world and her own place in it. This, then, is Brown's vision of the promise of art in the modern age: art is that which stands outside of time and, in doing so, forces the reader into a nonlinear relationship with enlightenment and primitivism both. The world cannot be undone, only reconsidered, and it is to this end that the novel works.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Fergusson 284.

² Phillip E. Wegner, Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002) 2.

³ Craig, Modern Scottish Novel 22.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 32. Italics in original.

⁵ MacIntyre 220.

⁶ MacIntyre 263.

⁷ The historical scope of this collection is echoed in works as diverse as Fishermen with Ploughs (1971) and The Six Lives of Fankle the Cat (1980).

⁸ George Mackay Brown, Pictures in the Cave (1977; Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990) 135.

⁹ MacIntyre 212.

¹⁰ Páll Skúlason, Saga and Philosophy and Other Essays (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1999) 19.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, 1955, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Harper/Fontana, 1992) 247.

¹² ‘Progress’, in Brown’s usage, should not be simply equated either with the Adornian notion of ‘enlightenment’ or the Heideggerian concept of ‘technology’, but is, like both of these terms, used to illustrate that which is both an obstacle and a path to the truth.

¹³ Maclean, Alasdair Maclean, “Cavemen” Times Literary Supplement 25 March, 1977: 347. This rather short review is used at great length throughout the chapter not because it is remarkable in itself, but because it succinctly formulates many of the criticisms levied at Brown under the rubric of primitivism. Maclean can be understood to represent a number of similar critical perspectives, which will be explored throughout the book, but at greatest length in chapter five.

¹⁴ W.R. Mackintosh, Around the Orkney Peat-Fires, 7th ed. (Kirkwall: “The Orcadian” Office, 1967).

¹⁵ George Mackay Brown, Northern Lights: A Poet’s Sources, ed. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (London: John Murray, 1999) 4.

¹⁶ Jerome J. McGann, The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 137.

¹⁷ McGann 134.

¹⁸ George Mackay Brown, Beside the Ocean of Time (London: John Murray, 1994) 130-131. Hereafter cited in text as *BOT*.

¹⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 28.

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, New German Critique 26 Spring-Summer, 1982: 30.

²¹ Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 141.

²² Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking 51.

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- ²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles, 1960, ed. Jonathan Rée, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London and New York: Verso, 2004) 52.
- ²⁴ Nancy, Being Singular Plural 185.
- ²⁵ Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future 223.
- ²⁶ Wegner xvi.
- ²⁷ Ernst Bloch, The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1989) 38. Italics in original.
- ²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 15. Italics in original.
- ²⁹ Adorno, Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 1966, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 1973) 8.
- ³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1944, trans. John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1997) 11-12.
- ³¹ Adorno and Horkheimer 3.
- ³² Jay Bernstein, "Art Against Enlightenment: Adorno's Critique of Habermas," The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 51.
- ³³ Adorno and Horkheimer 39.
- ³⁴ Adorno, Negative Dialectics 150.
- ³⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer 149.
- ³⁶ George Mackay Brown, An Orkney Tapestry (London: Victor Gollanz Ltd, 1969) 28. Hereafter cited in text as *OT*.
- ³⁷ Marshall Berman, All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity (London and New York: Verso, 1983) 24.
- ³⁸ Karl Marx, "Speech at the Anniversary of the People's Paper," 1856, The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978) 577-578.
- ³⁹ Fredric Jameson, Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic (London and New York: Verso, 1990) 5.
- ⁴⁰ Jameson, Late Marxism 163.
- ⁴¹ Adorno and Horkheimer 145-6.
- ⁴² Ian Campbell, "Beside Brown's Ocean of Time," Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present, ed. Susanne Hagemann (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996) 264-5.
- ⁴³ Robin Jenkins, The Changeling (1958; Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1995) 20.
- ⁴⁴ Ian Campbell, Kailyard (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1981) 14.
- ⁴⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Émile, 1762, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1957) 6.
- ⁴⁶ Keith Ansell-Pearson, Nietzsche contra Rousseau: A Study of Nietzsche's Moral and Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 54.
- ⁴⁷ Ansell-Pearson 78.
- ⁴⁸ Julia Simon-Ingram, "Alienation, Individuation and Enlightenment in Rousseau's Social Theory," Eighteenth-Century Studies 24.3 Spring, 1991: 318-9.
- ⁴⁹ Ansell-Pearson 55.

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- ⁵⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men *or* Second Discourse," The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 162, 164.
- ⁵¹ Adorno and Horkheimer 39.
- ⁵² Simon-Ingram 330.
- ⁵³ Campbell, Kailyard 47.
- ⁵⁴ Lesley Duncan, "Scotland's Word Champions," The Herald [Glasgow] 8 Dec. 1994: 4.
- ⁵⁵ Bernard O'Donoghue, "Orkney Idylls," Times Literary Supplement 1 April, 1994: 20.
- ⁵⁶ Samuel Johnson, A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (1775; London: Penguin Books, 1984) 113.
- ⁵⁷ Murray and Murray 120.
- ⁵⁸ O'Donoghue 20.
- ⁵⁹ In his notes for the writing of the novel, Brown draws up lists of each inhabitant of Norday, identified by both name and occupation. Such lists appear at both the beginning and end of the manuscript, for the way to understand the island is not only by the people who live there, but also by what they do.
- ⁶⁰ George Mackay Brown, Beside the Ocean of Time, ms. 3121, (University of Edinburgh Library).
- ⁶¹ Murray and Murray 254-5.
- ⁶² Brown, Beside ms. 3121.8 30-1.
- ⁶³ MacIntyre 125.
- ⁶⁴ Alexander Garcia Duttman, "Thinking as Gesture: A Note on Dialectic of Enlightenment," New German Critique 81 (Autumn, 2000): 145.
- ⁶⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "Opinion Delusion Society," trans. Henry W. Pickford, Yale Journal of Criticism 10.2 (1997): 230.
- ⁶⁶ Duttman 149.
- ⁶⁷ Isobel Murray and Bob Tait, "A Sequence of Images: George Mackay Brown," Scottish Writers Talking, ed. Isobel Murray (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press Ltd, 1996) 5. Italics in original.
- ⁶⁸ Thomas Mann, The Magic Mountain, 1924, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (London: Penguin, 1960) 542.
- ⁶⁹ George Mackay Brown, Greenvoe (London: Hogarth Press, 1972) 158. Hereafter cited in text as *G*.
- ⁷⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer 32-33.
- ⁷¹ Adorno and Horkheimer 32.
- ⁷² Simon Jarvis, Adorno: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 27.
- ⁷³ Adorno and Horkheimer 59.
- ⁷⁴ There is not space here to go into the various interpretations of what the Sirens may represent. Various critics and storytellers, however, have aligned them with mermaids and selkies and, given the role of Mara in the novel, it is tempting to make such a connection.
- ⁷⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer 33.
- ⁷⁶ Habermas, "Entwinement" 17.

⁷⁷ Christopher Nealon, "Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism," American Literature 76.3 (Sept. 2004): 581.

⁷⁸ Brown, Beside ms. 3121.9.

⁷⁹ The Golden Bird was published with a second long story, 'The Life and Death of John Voe', which repeats sentiments found widely throughout Brown's work and will not be discussed here.

⁸⁰ George Mackay Brown, The Golden Bird: Two Orkney Stories (London: John Murray, 1987) 48. Hereafter cited in text as *GB*.

⁸¹ Maura B. Nolan, "Making the Aesthetic Turn: Adorno, the Medieval, and the Future of the Past," Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 34.3 (Fall, 2004): 553.

⁸² Jay Parini, "Brief Lives," Times Literary Supplement 30 October, 1987: 1192.

⁸³ Adorno and Horkheimer 15.

⁸⁴ Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 23.

⁸⁵ Jarvis 7.

⁸⁶ Ernst Bloch, The Spirit of Utopia, 1923, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 235.

⁸⁷ Bloch, Spirit of Utopia 237.

Chapter 2

Sainthood-towards-death: *Magnus*

The story of Magnus Erlendson,¹ Earl of Orkney, is perhaps the best-known to emerge from the islands, the “most famous episode in Orkney’s history”.² In John Mooney’s modern hagiography, Magnus Erlendson is held to be “the outstanding personality of the Orkneys in olden days as well as in our own times”.³ This claim still stands seventy years after Mooney’s biography, thanks not only to the continued popularity of the *Orkneyinga Saga* and related Icelandic tellings, but as a result of George Mackay Brown’s repeated reworking of the story, most specifically in *An Orkney Tapestry*, *The Loom of Light* and *Magnus*. Brown calls Magnus’s martyrdom “The great drama at the heart of the Orkney story”,⁴ and later begins and ends his autobiography with references to Magnus: “These historical events form the backdrop to much of the narrative and verse that I have written. Without the violent beauty of those happenings eight and a half centuries ago, my writing would have been quite different” (*FI* 9). While he attests to the stylistic influence of the sagas in his work and to the ways in which they impart “the importance of pure shape” (*FI* 65), Brown also keeps central the mystical elements of the story: the last line of his autobiography reads: “I say, once a day at least, ‘Saint Magnus, pray for us...’” (*FI* 187). For Brown, the religious and the historical elements of the Magnus story are necessarily entwined; historical veracity is no more central to his reading of the sagas than their function as devotional texts. In his tellings of this story, most particularly in the three texts named above but also in many of his short stories and poems, Brown continually rebalances the tension between these two elements of history and myth. Crucially, however, he not only addresses this tension, but also uses it to explore further the divide between individualism and community, the value of

sacrifice and the significance of death. Brown uses the story of Magnus to demonstrate the ways in which the life of an individual can stand in for the life of the community and how the death of an individual can be the defining event in a community's existence. Saint Magnus is the central figure in Brown's writing (and, perhaps, given his involvement in the St. Magnus Festival among other events, in his life), and it is in his reworkings of this one story that his greatest philosophical and religious methods and beliefs become most clear.

A. Medieval and Modern Variants of the Magnus Myth

There are three primary narratives of the life and death of Magnus Erlendson, all drawn from the same Latin biography, written in the early twelfth century by a priest known as Master Robert.⁵ The most widely disseminated and oldest of these translations is found in the *Orkneyinga Saga* itself, which situates Magnus's martyrdom within the context of the history of the earls of Orkney until the early thirteenth century. Two separate sagas, quite closely related, are devoted entirely to Magnus, the *Longer Magnus Saga* and *Shorter Magnus Saga* (hereafter LMS and SMS respectively). The SMS, approximately concurrent with the *Orkneyinga Saga*, is particularly focused on the moment of Magnus's death; it does not include great detail on Magnus's childhood, primarily limiting itself to events concerning the battle of the Menai Strait, in which Magnus, serving under the Norwegian king Magnus Barelegs, refuses to fight against the Welsh and instead recites the psalter from the deck of the ship, an episode which appears in every variant. A full half of the saga is concerned with the miracles performed by Magnus after his death, a listing of small-scale works, mostly concerning peasants, which

are recounted quite calmly, with few pauses for religious invocation. In this moderation between religious and historical impulse, the SMS reads very similarly to the account of Magnus's life given in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, the “most sober”⁶ of the three extant versions. It is in many ways simply an abridgement of the longer account given in the *Saga*. Its importance lies in separating the story of Magnus out from that of other earls; the reader is forced to consider the text not just as history, but also as quite possibly something with greater individual cultural significance. Little attention is given in either the *Saga* or the SMS to the childhoods of Magnus and his cousin Hakon Paulson. The *Saga*, however, includes an interlude in which Paulson receives his fortune from a Swedish wise man, who foretells that: “‘During your life you’ll be the cause of a crime for which you’ll barely be able to atone – perhaps never – to that god you believe in’”.⁷ This prophecy sets up the two primary themes of all three variants: the life of Magnus is one which gains its import in hindsight – which is to say that the significance of Magnus's life is drawn from knowledge of his martyrdom and sainthood, rather than from his living accomplishments – and the ways in which that martyrdom serves to represent the shift from Scandinavian religions to Christianity.

The author of the *Orkneyinga Saga* does not dwell on the religious import of the Magnus story overmuch, interjecting only two fervent interludes of devotional writing into its primarily political narrative. The first such deviation from pure historical narrative comes when Magnus is killed. According to the recorder, Magnus:

prayed not only for himself and his friends but for his enemies and murderers, forgiving them with all his heart for their crimes against him. He confessed his own sins before God, praying that his soul might be washed clean by the spilling of his own blood, then placed it in God's hands. He asked that he might be greeted by God's angels and carried by them into the peace of Paradise.⁸

This voicing of Magnus's private prayers is a significant departure from the tone of the rest of the *Saga*, which is largely an unexaggerated account of battles and successions without significant authorial intrusion or supposition. The saga author's willingness to deviate from verifiable events speaks to the story's religious, rather than political, significance. The death of Rognvald, one of the "most popular and gifted" of the Earls of Orkney, which occurs only sixty years before that of Magnus, is treated almost cursorily ("Rognvald was carrying his lap-dog with him and it was this that betrayed him. They killed him on the spot among the rocks").⁹ Clearly, for the author of the sagas Magnus's inward struggle is central to the story's value; his death leads not only to the succession of Hakon Paulson to unified rule, but to a series of miracles which inspire religious devotion. The miracles themselves are accorded a chapter of their own, at the end of which the saga author offers this prayer:

[we] close this particular account with the prayer that he who wrote this record, he who has told it, and all who listen to it may enjoy from that holy knight of God, Earl Magnus, blessings and the answer to their prayers for the remission of their sins and for everlasting joy: also from our Almighty Lord Jesus Christ, succour and mercy, peace and rejoicing, both now and in the future, from Him who was, is and ever shall be the one and only true and eternal God, who gives, wills and commands all good things: for ever and ever, Amen.¹⁰

There is no other passage in the *Saga* remotely like this one. Nowhere else does the author appear, and nowhere else is Christianity invoked, except as a political expedient. The Magnus episode is clearly separated out from the rest of the history: it allows the appearance of the recorder and, furthermore, a display of that recorder's own faith. There is no pretence towards objectivity here, no attempt to tell the story as another in a series of political assassinations. The weight of the story is founded upon not only the religiously significant events contained within, but upon the manner in which they appeal

to later readers. For these reasons, as well as stylistic differences (what the translator Alexander Burt Taylor calls its “unctuous tone and edifying purpose”), it is assumed that the episode is of different authorship than the rest of the *Saga*.¹¹ Even if this episode stands out as “a clunking interpolation of Christian propaganda into the saga as a whole”,¹² as Robin Waugh argues, it is nevertheless remarkable that none of the variants presumes that Magnus is killed for religious reasons. Magnus never openly declares his Christianity, for instance, nor does Hakon – occasionally seen in more recent texts as representative of Scandinavian religious practices – use religious difference as a rationale for the killing. Instead, the role of Christianity is limited to the discussion of miracles and the interpolations of the narrator, elements which are further emphasised in later variants.

In the final medieval version of the story, the LMS, the religious element of the story is strongly foregrounded. This version begins with an invocation to the greater glory of God, who has used the life of Magnus to demonstrate his will to all humanity, both those contemporary to Magnus and those in the present:

Praise glory and splendour and honour be to Almighty God, our redeemer and maker, for his manifold mercy and grace, which he bestows on us who dwell on the uttermost edge of the world; so that after the saying of the masters who so set it in their books, it seems to them as though we were come out of the world. And yet all the same though it be so, God hath deigned to show us his mercy, especially in that he hath let us come to the knowledge of his blessed name; and therewith given us strong pillars, the most saintly forerunners of holy Christianity, from whose holiness the whole North shines and beams near and far. These [...] include] Magnus, the Isle-earl, who brightens the Orkneys with his holiness, to whose honour the aftercoming Saga is put together.¹³

The tonal shift in the LMS is not only lexical,¹⁴ but is also apparent in both the changed focus, wherein the history related is not to be examined for its own sake but for its relevance to modern Christianity, and in the appearance of the author as a commentator.

The LMS purports to be the work of Master Robert himself, and is interspersed with sermons on the significance of Magnus's martyrdom from the priest. Even the style is foregrounded, not as being in keeping with standards of other Icelandic sagas, but in keeping with God's will: "for the Lord made short discourses, so we make this story plain with clear words and pure telling, as God hath granted us to discern".¹⁵ The interest of the author is not in recording history for its own sake, or for that of genealogies or political means, but in recording a version of history which glorifies God. Contemporary reviews noted that Dasent's translation of the LMS, quoted above, "hardly does justice to the [...] difference between the plain, straightforward style of ordinary history and the swelling chant of the interpolator".¹⁶ The LMS, and to a certain extent the chapters of the *Saga* which focus solely on Magnus, are distinct from the remainder of the *Saga*, and from the style of Icelandic sagas generally. The aims of the LMS must thus be seen as foreign to those of the rest of the *Saga*; its dissemination is not for the sake of historical record, but for that of religious exhortation.

Unlike the two earlier versions of the story, the author of the LMS spends considerable time on Magnus's childhood. No new stories are included, but instead the author reiterates the continual assurance that Magnus has lived a holy, unblemished life, one which befits his martyrdom. The author carefully places all of the brutalities of life as a medieval earl within the context of this seemingly predetermined saintliness:

Though to many good birth might turn to pride and spoiling of temper, this blessed youth was already in the first off shoot of his childhood bright and learned by the teaching of the Holy Spirit. [...] M]any turn their customs after those with whom they live, and whosoever toucheth tar is defiled of it; so when Magnus had come to be about fullgrown of age, placed among grim and wicked men who were ill-willed against good habits, unstable in the faith, opposed to right laws, stiff-necked in learning, yielding to evil habits, gainsayers and disobedient to God's commandments; he seemed for some winters like wicked men, and as a Viking

with robbers and warriors he lived by robbery and plunder, and stood by at manslaughters along with others. But it is to be believed that he did this more from the wickedness and egging on of bad men than from his own badness.¹⁷

Magnus can, indeed, do no wrong. The author does not deny his part in war and viking, but instead removes him of the burden of responsibility. As one of God's elect (as later generations of Scots would have seen it), the historical events of his life pale in consideration to what comes after. This passage, too, implicitly relates the worldly temptations of Magnus to those of Christ as presented in the Gospel of Saint Matthew (4.1-11) in order to show how Magnus "found Christ-like strength and inspirations to throw off the fetters of violent ways".¹⁸ Although this version of the story dates only ten or twenty years after the *Orkneyinga Saga*¹⁹ (and purports to be much earlier in origin), the saintliness of Magnus has by this point become almost the whole story. Magnus has become, in this telling, fully Christ-like: "And this his deed was needed for the highest proof, that on that spot he should become the sacrifice of God, as the helpful sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ's body and blood was offered up for the good of the whole world".²⁰ In order to clarify this symbolic martyrdom, in the LMS Magnus is not killed after a political discussion that he comes to of his own will, as occurs in the other variants, but is forcibly dragged out of Mass by Hakon's men, "the most harmful wolves".²¹ Magnus, in this version of the story, is glorified not only by the miracles which follow his death, nor the way in which he dies, but in every moment of his life. Each incident in his life serves to illustrate his saintliness (and, where possible, the evilness of Hakon). The LMS enters fully into hagiography; while it changes little in the general outline of Magnus's biography, it refocuses the reader's attention on the ways in which that biography can be used to exemplify a Christian life.

This turn towards religious instruction is best exemplified in the passage following Magnus's death. The *Orkneyinga Saga* and the SMS include a description of Magnus's first miracle – in which the land on which Magnus is killed turns from rocky and barren to green and fertile at the instant of his death – and briefly mention miracles to come. Both variants then turn to Hakon's rule and only include stories of Magnus's miracles much later. In the LMS, the story of this first miracle is followed by a lengthy sermon purportedly given by Master Robert on the feastday of St. Magnus. Not only does the reader experience the fullness of Magnus's sainthood long before the miraculous proof, but the scope of Magnus's influence is opened up far beyond the local peoples of Orkney: Magnus “drove away the throne of the lordship of the Devil out of the northern airt of the world [...] he conquered the world and the world's lords, and he ascended a noble victor over the world, taking from his holy master, our Lord Jesus Christ, a crown of glory”.²² The congregation listening to this sermon is then asked to “follow the footsteps and life of the glorious martyr”, though “his life and holy virtue is rather more praiseworthy and wonderful than possible to be imitated by our weakness”.²³ Magnus is no longer an earl whose life is told in the context of other earls; he is instead made fully into a saint, at the expense of being less than human, an example for human conduct whose actual life is quite beside the point. Within a matter of years, in three texts built from the same source material, it is possible to see Magnus transformed from Earl to Saint.

The saintly aspect of Magnus's life is the one which most greatly interests John Mooney, his modern biographer. Mooney's hagiography was published only three years before Alexander Taylor's definitive edition of the *Saga*, in which aspects of the Magnus

story are dismissed as “monotonous and puerile”,²⁴ but is completely opposed to Taylor’s methodology. Taylor views the accounts of miracles as historical curiosities:

In an age when the concepts of Natural Law and what the modern world calls Common Sense were transcended by the concept of Divine Omnipotence, any coincidence or apparent abnormality in the normal course of events was interpreted as an intervention of God in terrestrial affairs. [...] In this manner are to be explained the miracles of Saint Magnus.²⁵

Mooney, however, attempts to historicise these miracles: “whether we believe or do not believe that these were supernatural events, it is necessary and right to consider them in the light of that century, and not in the light of the present century”.²⁶ This is, however, as impartial as Mooney gets, and he is far more often accustomed to include phrases such as: “The story of his life is a demonstration of the heights which may be reached by the man in whose spirit the heart of Christ abides”.²⁷ Mooney’s purpose in his biography, scholarly ambition aside, is to demonstrate the ways in which the Magnus story represents “the triumph of Good over Evil”.²⁸ In this manner, Mooney most closely follows the text of the LMS, viewing Magnus as an exemplar of Christian behaviour, and reinterpreting all the events of his life with that ideal in mind. This polarisation of the religious and the historical has informed the dominant reading of the Magnus story, as can be seen not only in more recent variations but also in criticism such as Elizabeth Huberman’s apologia for Brown’s *Magnus*, discussed below. What began as historical event is now most often read as a clearcut story of the triumph of good over evil, an interpretation that Brown himself attempts to dispel.

Mooney’s text is important to the study of Brown’s own reworkings of the tales not only because, by virtue of its popularity and influence, it is likely that Brown drew upon it for his own work (*OT* 23-4),²⁹ but also because Mooney, more explicitly than

other biographers, labours to introduce ways in which the Magnus story can be made relevant to modern life. In writing of the ways in which Magnus represents the coming of Christianity, Mooney points out that: “the history of Europe in the second decade of the twentieth century proved that the Christianity of the nations was still a blend of Odinism and Christianity”.³⁰ Mooney continues this somewhat tenuous claim that the First World War is illustrative of Magnus’s own Christian goals by arguing that Magnus was

in advance of his time. [...] In that far-off, dark Past, did he have a vision of the futility of war? [...] Ten million lives were sacrificed in the Great War, in the hope that there would be no more wars, yet in less than twenty years there are fears of a worse conflict. Peace and goodwill can prevail only when men realise that ‘all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword’.³¹

This passage is remarkably prescient of Brown’s own final version of the story in *Magnus*, in which the events of the Second World War are closely paralleled with Magnus’s death on Egilsay. Mooney’s biography is predicated on turning the image of Magnus as a warring earl into that of a modern pacifist: “to him the Gospel was more powerful than the sword; and his witness for Christ and His teaching had a message for his own times and ours”.³² Mooney’s focus, then, is not on Magnus as an historical figure but as a particularly modern one, not on Magnus as a Northern ruler but as a Christian. For Mooney, as for the authors of religious and tourist pamphlets in the ensuing decades such as D.P. Thomson, the death of Magnus “proved the turning point in the religious history of Orkney”.³³ Until Brown became the dominant popular interpreter of the Magnus story the religious elements of the narrative became almost wholly dominant over the political, despite, as mentioned above, it being virtually impossible to interpret this martyrdom as one founded in religious motives. In works such as those by

Mooney and Thomson, Magnus becomes a far more familiar saint, one who has lived a godly life and can be used as an example for the reader to follow. Like the author of the LMS, Mooney never explicitly denies the more violent aspects of Magnus's life, but rather insists that they were out of character, that the saint Magnus became in (and after) death was the same man in his life. Magnus becomes a tool for religious and cultural exploration, a man whose life was formed retroactively in regards to his death.

B. The Seamless Garment: *An Orkney Tapestry* and *The Loom of Light*

Brown, in his reworking of the Magnus story, immediately recognises the difficulties of hagiography. His first major attempt at telling the story lies at the centre of *An Orkney Tapestry*, in the chapter "Martyr". Brown laments that "we cannot get a clear picture of the man because his monkish biographer has smudged the outline with conventional pious platitudes" (OT 72). The chapter consists primarily of quotations from Taylor's translation of the *Saga*, which Brown has adapted to a slightly more modern tongue – in order to "round out a meaning" (OT 12) – interspersed with Brown's reflections on the significance of the tale. For Brown, the focus on a predestined saintliness found in the earlier accounts and the ways in which Magnus is portrayed as having lived a blameless life form a "pietistic fog". At the same time, however, "The events that gather about him are so extraordinary, and were witnessed by so many people, and were enacted in such a hard light, that there is no faking of the record" (OT 73). Brown repeatedly argues that the events of Magnus's life are so extraordinary that they could not have been invented, only witnessed: "no one could have invented the psalter in the Welsh battle, or the tears of Lifolf the cook-executioner, or the conversation between

Hakon and Magnus's mother" (*OT* 83). In Brown's reading of the story, it is those elements which are most strange which are most true. This claim initially jars grossly with Brown's assertion in the same book that: "If the Viking myth is true, it is true with so many reservations and qualifications as to be almost meaningless. No harm is done, except that the corridors of history get filled with unreal figures and hollow voices" (*OT* 28). Brown himself later admitted that in *An Orkney Tapestry* he "wrenched history too far out of its frame" (*FI* 170). What Brown begins to do in "Martyr" – a project he continues for many years – is to establish the idea of a popular history which is culturally validated and finds its truth value in consensus. In *An Orkney Tapestry* he is far from successful: if Viking myths are "almost meaningless", Christian ones remain "not possible [...] to fake" (*OT* 84). The issue of which myths Brown chooses to preserve, and why, will be addressed at greater length below. Brown's focus in this chapter, however, and one to which he returns repeatedly, is the symbol of the Seamless Garment, at times standing variously for community, God and political unity.

The "Seamless Garment" of *An Orkney Tapestry* firstly represents community: the "warmth and comfort and well-being of the people, [...] their identity and their ethos" (*OT* 77). This is "the coat of diurnal hand-to-mouth existence" (*OT* 77) that concerns everyone within the community, and the one on which Brown focuses most heavily in his first telling of the Magnus story. Magnus's death forms "another section of the Seamless Garment" (*OT* 70) because it is central not only to the life and succession of the ruling families, but to all members of the community: in this metaphor, there are no events that can take place within the community which concern only a few people. Brown also uses the metaphor to include the ceremonial coat worn by the ruling earl. Magnus's death

allows the coat not to be split, because it is worn by one man within the context of a unified rule under Hakon Paulson. Finally, Brown writes of a third coat, which is that of Christianity; it is “the long white weave of innocence”. In *Magnus*, this third aspect forms the dominant use of the metaphor. A long section, similar in placement and style to Master Robert’s sermons in the LMS, is devoted to Bishop William’s homily, “Concerning the Two Coats, of Caesar and of God, that cover Adam’s Shame”, in which the coat of community and the coat of earldom become one; the ceremonial garment does not only cover the earl, but “in a mystical way it enwraps the whole community”.³⁴

Bishop William is unable to write of the heavenly cloak of Christianity; it is instead presented to Magnus in dreams and visions, ultimately carried by an angel or man only Magnus can see as he says his final Mass (*M* 141-7). The use of the imagery of a coat, both in *An Orkney Tapestry* and the works which follow, is also able to tie together both religious and secular influences. Brown highlights the biblical parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:2-14) in which a man is cast out of a wedding for not being properly attired: the metaphor of the perfect garment thus is used to stand for Magnus’s ability to be accepted by God. The metaphor works in the opposite direction as well, however, for clothing is traditionally used in the sagas to represent the beneficence of a king or earl: it is the mark he gives to a retainer or loyal subject.³⁵ The gift of clothing in traditional sagas represents both acceptance and generosity. While the single metaphor is perhaps overworked over the course of Brown’s rewritings, especially in *The Loom of Light*, he employs it in order to find a new approach to the way in which a saint can be understood: not for his actions and death alone, but as one part of a wider community. As George M. Brunsden argues, in many instances in Western Christendom “veneration of the saint

becomes an expression of communalism”.³⁶ In his metaphor of the seamless garment Brown attempts to show why this might be so, how the death of one man, and miracles performed on a scant few more (seventeen, in the case of Magnus), can alter an entire community.

For Brown, the “truest sign of martyrdom” is not contained in the death or the miracles, but in “the abundant horn of peace that tiled over the islands” after Magnus’s death (*OT* 85). For, as Ranald says in Brown’s novel *Vinland* – written much later but set in the years immediately preceding the birth of Magnus – ““What’s needed in Orkney is a saint””.³⁷ What truly sanctifies a martyr, for Brown, is the effect that such a man’s death has on the community at large. It is for this reason that Brown introduces his tinkers, Jock and Mary, witnesses to the first (and only) miracle described in each of his versions, in a scene which changes very little. “No saga-man would have written about folk like Jock and Mary”, Brown contends, “two vagrants who wander about the shores and burns, as secret and dangerous as otters” (*OT* 86), but they are loosely tied to some of the Orkney and Shetland islanders who experienced miracles. Rowena Murray explicitly links them to Sigurd and Thorbjorn in the *Orkneyinga Saga*,³⁸ who are cured of their crippledness, alongside a ferryman called Bergfinn Skatason who is cured of blindness, when they keep vigil at Magnus’s grave.³⁹ Jock and Mary are also archetypes of the lowest peasants, however, wholly dependent on the society above them. Jock is a believer, the first islander to pray for the intercession of Saint Magnus, while Mary, who is cured of her blindness by a spray of sea-water, believes in miracles no more strongly after receiving one than beforehand. The heart of the scene is Jock’s prayer to Magnus, in which he pleads, attempts to make many deals, professes his love for Mary and

apologises for her lack of faith, even as he is constantly met with silence and the Bishop's declaration that: "There's no Saint Magnus [...] only the tomb of the earl who was murdered in Egilsay" (*OT* 93). At the moment of the miracle, there is almost no dialogue, only lengthy, unperformable stage directions, in which Brown discusses the clay in the soul of each human, and states that: "Harder than precious stones are acts of pity and praise and charity. [...] With these jewels are purchased meantime many a miracle and blessing for the afflicted ones of the earth" (*OT* 96). Magnus himself is "now in two places at once. He is lying with a terrible wound in his face, in the church near where the two tinkers are girding themselves for the road. [...] Also he is pure essence in another intensity, a hoarder of the treasures of charity and prayer, a guardian" (*OT* 96). This is neither successful playwriting nor especially convincing prose; it is at these moments, when he is attempting to be most sincere, that Brown's style falters most and he adopts a lexicon and rhythm which do not befit his story. His interpretation of sainthood is made more clear because of it, however. For Brown, saints do not exist at a remove from the community from which they emerged, but act as guardians for all within that community. Mary is the recipient of the first miracle not because she is grateful or deserving, but because Jock intercedes on her behalf. True religion lies in the actions of the community, its lowest members above all. In his autobiography, Brown writes that long before his conversion to Catholicism, he was disappointed by the mass itself, but found that: "The devotion of the working-class women did move me: here they found beauty and peace in the midst of drab lives" (*FI* 53). Brown is, in his life and works, not interested in a Protestant form of personal salvation as would be espoused by a Luther or Calvin, but in the effects of religious belief on an entire community. It is to this end that

his miracles are, as in the *Saga*, small and quiet; by handing them to unbelievers, he further cements the notion of Magnus's death as forming the salvation of the community at large.

The one-act play concerning Jock and Mary in *An Orkney Tapestry* is introduced with the lines: "The story of Magnus and Hakon unfolds like a drama. Some day a play will be written about it; I have not the ability myself; but I end this chapter with a scene in dramatic form [...] as a suggestion of what might be possible" (OT 85-6). Clearly Brown overcame his self-doubt, for his play on the same subject, *The Loom of Light*, was produced in Kirkwall in 1972. The outline of the story is much the same as in the *Saga* and in the "Martyr" chapter, although Brown admitted in an unpublished interview at the time that: "I haven't scrupled to use my imagination when I thought it might illumine some dark places".⁴⁰ In this case, the "dark places" Brown seeks to illumine are the lives of the surrounding community inhabitants. A chorus is instituted both to set the scene and to convey verbally the themes Brown was limited to expressing in stage directions in the earlier version. As Donald Campbell argues, the chorus is modern, even Brechtian, and yet also allows Brown to create an atmosphere of ancient ritual.⁴¹ Indeed, the chorus can be seen as a tool of distancing the audience, for in its repetition of seasonal observations, the chorus serves to prove that the events in this story are not as extraordinary as they might initially appear, but are grounded in the world as it is. This expanded version of the play attempts to include all that the *Saga* leaves unmentioned: the croftwomen, monks, fishermen and peasants.⁴² The play is divided into seven sections which correspond almost exactly to those in *Magnus*.⁴³ The first scene, "Seedtime", opens with the peasants Hild and Mans – as Berthold Schoene points out, a

diminutive form of “Magnus”⁴⁴ – ploughing the field. Hild herself is yoked to the plough, as their ox is lame. The couple represent alternate views on those who hold power in the islands: Mans’s dislike for the factor, the earls, the bishop and the king is echoed later by the tinker Mary’s disdain for the mechanisms of the church. The chorus’s songs to the sea, coupled with Mans’s belief that, to the wealthy, the peasants are “just beasts”,⁴⁵ exemplifies the social split found in the Orkneys before Magnus’s martyrdom. The atmosphere Brown sets up in this scene is not one of violence, as in *Magnus*, but of distrust; the requirements of self-preservation are so great that all the world is an enemy to the peasants. Brown also introduces here, in the chorus’s Bridal Song, the theme of the garment:

Listen: somewhere a loom is set
Beyond moth and rust.
Fall, tissue of peace, from the loom,
A single fold of light,
That the just man
May walk at last in a white coat among his people.⁴⁶

By beginning the play in the absence of Magnus and his family – Erlend and Thora, whose wedding is being celebrated, are never named – Brown foregrounds not the act of martyrdom itself, but the people Magnus’s death serves to save. He returns to Hild and Mans in the final scene, “The Harvest”. Little has changed: the peasants are still labouring and distrustful. There is a new air of compassion here, however; in giving Jock and Mary a bannock, Hild says: ““We were as poor as them last winter. And poorer the winter before that. The war’s over. We can all eat in peace. We have Hakon, our good earl, to thank for that. We’re only as rich as the poorest folk among us.””⁴⁷ Hakon’s rule, predicated on Magnus’s death, has not only granted increased prosperity to the peasants, but also given them a broader, more humane world-view. The peace which Magnus’s

death brings is little noticed by the peasants, and Magnus himself is never mentioned by them, yet his death is used to benefit the entire community.

Four of the remaining five scenes illustrate the life of Magnus. (The fourth scene of the play, “The Fields in Summer”, returns to Hild and Mans during the war between the earls, in which the peasants are menaced by both Hakon and Magnus’s soldiers.) In the first biographical scene Magnus and Hakon, along with those boys who will grow to become their advisors, begin their education at the cathedral on Birsay. While the episode itself is unmentioned in any of the older accounts, it echoes the LMS description of Magnus’s childhood, in which, “He cared little for loose company and games like other young men, but rather showed himself of seemly conduct, though he were young in the tale of winters; because at once was revealed in him the evident gift of the Holy Spirit, which guided him to all good things”.⁴⁸ In Brown’s version of Magnus’s entry into religious education, the child ignores those around him – who, by birth or religious authority, represent all of the power on the island – in order to minister to a wounded seal. Brown here literalises the Bishop’s claim from earlier in the scene that Magnus and Hakon are “bringing that old wound [the vying earldoms] to the brothers for a year or so”.⁴⁹ As shown in the previous chapter, the human world is best understood not as a departure from the natural world, but as part of a continuity; so here, the wounded seal is used to represent not only a rent between humans and nature, but the violence within human society itself. Not only is the seal wounded, however, but “his coat’s all blood”;⁵⁰ Brown here is overworking his metaphor of “The coat-of-state riven [...] so [that] Orkney, poor Orkney, bleeds from generation to generation”,⁵¹ voiced by the Bishop moments earlier. Magnus’s purpose with both the seal and the Orkneys, then, is to

staunch the blood. In a poem repeated verbatim in *Magnus* (as, indeed, is the majority of dialogue in *The Loom of Light*), Magnus sings to the seal:

Come from the rock now, cold one.
See, I have a fish for you in my hand.
My name is Magnus.
I have told the hunters to leave this shore.
There is a wound in your head.
If you do not come to me soon you will die.
Your blood will grow cold as shells.
Rats and crabs will cover your beautiful coat.⁵²

Magnus sees himself as prohibiting violence in order to protect the beautiful coat, not only of the seal, but of community, earldom and God.

This metaphor of the coat continues to appear throughout the play. In this short form, Brown resists developing the metaphor, instead letting repeated uses of the imagery surface in so many contexts that the reader cannot help but make connections. Indeed, the image of the coat appears to stand for absolutely everything. In “The Song of Battle”, depicting the battle of the Menai Strait, Magnus is shown reading from the psalter, in accordance with all early versions, but Brown includes those passages he reads: “Why take ye thought for raiment?” (Matthew 6:28); “Who is [...] this beautiful one in his robe?” (Isaiah 63:1); “The king’s daughter[‘s ...] clothing is of wrought gold” (Psalm 45:13); as well as a retelling of the Genesis story of Joseph’s robe and a recitation of the 23rd Psalm. These passages are not selected so much for their religious significance as for their bare mentioning of “coats”; Brown here is continuing to force his metaphor by constant repetition. The chorus, for instance, denotes the colour of the monks’ clothing at the beginning of every scene: it changes from “long bright coats” (first four scenes) to “long black coats” for the two scenes which depict Magnus’s martyrdom – which, given that Magnus’s death falls on Easter Monday, must be regarded as poetic license on

Brown's part, as the liturgical colours of Easter are traditionally white and gold – to “long bright coats” again at the close of the play. At the moment of his death, Magnus gives his coat to the chef/executioner Lifolf, even as he voices doubts that he is not worthy of a more heavenly garment: “maybe it's not for me, that coat. There's too much blood and ashes on my hands. That coat is woven of prayers, charities, vows, penances, fastings.”⁵³ The literal coat of state Magnus gives to Hakon, for: “The strong man who relishes government, only he can suffer it on his shoulders”.⁵⁴ Curiously, Brown does not make explicit the obvious parallel with Christ, whose coat is used in a lottery at the time of his death, so that it might not be torn (John 19:23-24). Despite the somewhat hackneyed imagery here, what Brown is attempting is clear: for Magnus to be relevant to the contemporary reader, his death must be significant not only from a religious standpoint, or even from a political, but also in the way in which it affects the entire surrounding community. The coat must then carry both religious and political weight, but more importantly it stands for the community as a whole; in Magnus's wearing and subsequent rejection of this coat Brown focuses on his varying role as representative/saviour of the community, even when his actions are the very thing from which the community must be saved. This emphasis on the way in which one life (or rather, one death) can alter the entire world around it forms the centre of his fullest imaging of the story, his novel *Magnus*.

C. *Magnus* and the Nature of Sacrifice

Magnus is written “on the stark framework of the play”.⁵⁵ Brown himself contends that in this final version lies “the best writing I have done” (FI 171). As Julian

D'Arcy argues, the novel "is indeed the culmination of Mackay Brown's study and interpretation of the Orkney saint's life",⁵⁶ in part because the form of the novel allows far more experimental variation than either the biographical short story or play. Brown himself cites his attempt to make "as full use as possible of the more varied techniques at the novelist's disposal".⁵⁷ Most specifically, rather than representing the varied viewpoints of the larger community only through action and setting, he does so through a wide range of stylistic and lexical devices; in many ways, *Magnus*, for all its dependence on medieval sources, is the most contemporary of all Brown's fictional works. In an essay praising the *Orkneyinga Saga*, published only a month before the release of *Magnus*, Brown argues that: "In these present days of ghastly narrative styles, here was prose simple, direct, and dramatic".⁵⁸ His work in *Orkney Tapestry* and *Loom of Light* can be seen as an attempt to emulate that style. Especially in the "Martyr" chapter, the bulk of writing is inseparable from the *Saga* itself, and is largely a variant translation. In *Magnus*, however, Brown embraces the very "ghastly narrative styles" which he elsewhere derides; the story is told in a blend of drama, verse and prose. It is also told both in language which mimics the sagas and in language which mimics present-day news bulletins. Although the full measure of stylistic diversity is most easily seen in the climactic chapter, "The Killing", the remainder of the novel is also a blend of contemporary and medieval styles and, in those styles, ways of looking at the figure of Magnus. Brown's mission in the novel is, indeed, to reinvent Magnus for contemporary readers, to remove the "pietistic fog" of early accounts and present a timeless figure who is nevertheless still grounded in a specific era.

The most notable reworking is seen in the final chapter, “Harvest,” much of which is repeated from the earlier two imaginings. In the five years between “Martyr” and *Magnus*, however, Brown has significantly reduced the import of the miracle, until in its final version it is almost unnoticeable. In the one-act play included in “Martyr”, Magnus is, in parenthetical asides, virtually present at the moment of Mary’s restored sight: “Saint Magnus the Martyr accepts the flame [of Jock’s candle]. He touches it to immortality, a hard diamond. The radiance he reserves, to give back again where it is needed” (OT 96-7). Jock then accepts the direct correlation between his lighting of a candle and the restoration of Mary’s sight: “Who would think a ha’penny candle would light up the world?” (OT 98). This miracle is closely related to those in the *Saga*, in which peasants from the Orkneys and Shetlands are cured of blindness, insanity and other ailments after keeping a vigil at Magnus’s grave or, after he is canonised, contributing money to his shrine. When Brown revisits the scene in *The Loom of Light*, however, he slightly subdues the religious revelation. While Jock makes the same statement about his ha’penny candle, the lines about Magnus have been removed. The monks’ litany, chanted throughout in all versions, is changed at the moment of Mary’s cure from “St Tredwell, virgin”, to “St Tredwell, keeper of eyes”, so that the possibility is raised that Magnus is not responsible for the miracle, but that it is the intercession of the whole body of saints which cures Mary. At the close of *Magnus*, little initially appears to have changed in Brown’s imagining: indeed, perhaps the only change in the depiction of Magnus from “Martyr” is one of tense, and in most other respects the passage is identical. However, the response of Jock and Mary changes subtly. While Mary remains ungrateful, Jock loses the religious fervour he presents in the earlier passages. After he

shouts the final line (again present in all three versions) – “Saint Magnus the Martyr, pray for us.... Jock the tinker said it before any of you” – he is shown to have “put the empty sack over his shoulder and turned and moved off after the sea-washed feet of Mary” (*M* 206). What has changed is that Jock and Mary are placed back in the community of the islands: “The great red vat-and-lamp-and-loom was high in the east now. Under the sun the crofters of Orkney brought out their peaceful scythes for the second morning of the harvest. There were glitters and flashes all over Birsay” (*M* 206). The direct gratitude and wonder of the earlier versions has changed into an acceptance that Magnus in death does not serve to perform miracles so much as to preserve normalcy. The miracle on which the reader is meant to focus is not one of restored eyesight, but one of maintained peace. In this slight shift of perspective, Brown is using his final version of the story to turn his focus not to the saint or his actions, but to the community at large.

In many respects, Brown’s shift away from the focus on miracles that dominates previous accounts, and indeed grows more central to the story over time, dominates the way in which the story is told. In medieval Christianity, especially in its Anglo-Saxon variants, it was quite common to have royal saints, political leaders (most often kings themselves) who are killed for political purposes and whose saintliness follows almost as an afterthought. As Margaret Cormack argues, “Although the hagiographers may try to provide a rationale for the crime that would give it religious significance, it is clear that the real cause for the elimination of the victims was their status as potential rivals to the throne”.⁵⁹ The loose outlines of Magnus’s life certainly fit this summary; even as later accounts elaborate on Magnus’s godliness in life, few deny that he was murdered for

political reasons, rather than religious ones. Indeed, Brunsden has argued that the canonisation of Magnus was itself largely political, a cult formed to oppose the popularity of King Olaf, the Norse King.⁶⁰ Brunsden's account certainly helps explain Magnus's popularity not just in the Orkneys, but in Iceland and Shetland as well, areas which would be uncomfortable with a Norse saint. The accounts of miracles may then be thought of as something of an afterthought, a latent justification for Magnus's martyrdom. While Brown writes from a Christian perspective, and is indebted to such writers as Mooney in his attempts to show that Magnus lived a largely holy life, in *Magnus* he attempts to secularise the saint and to foreground the political implications of this death. Magnus's death cannot be seen in purely religious terms, as critics such as Patrick Reilly have argued. Reilly sees the novel as representing "the man of God confronting the men of power [...] an Orkney re-enactment of Golgotha".⁶¹ He is right to note the Christ-like framework in which Magnus's actions are placed, but entirely ignores their political ramifications, the very aspect of the story Brown is attempting to highlight. Instead, as Schoene argues, "Brown resuscitates the Orkney martyr as *both* a credible historical agent and a heavenly saint".⁶² Much more will be said below about Brown's portrayal of Magnus as a saint, but first his portrayal of Magnus as an earl must be examined.

The one scene wholly new to the novel falls in the chapter "The Temptations". The chapter begins as a pastiche of ancient texts, sounding somewhat biblical and somewhat indebted to the sagas, but also more distanced and reserved than either:

It was said, concerning the holy martyr Magnus, that to gain his soul's kingdom he had to suffer five grievous temptations, and but that he was upheld then and ever and near the hour of his blessed martyrdom by a certain comforter that was sent to him, his soul might have been overborne by the evil one and brought down into the fires of hell. (*M* 67)

Here, more than anywhere else in the novel, is Magnus's death prefigured by his life; Brown here stipulates a teleological martyrdom. The chapter contains a reading of Magnus's actions which presupposes a certain end, even if that end is always in flux, as well as a necessary 'Being-towards-death', about which more will be said below. There is, too, a deliberate echo of the three temptations of Christ, in which he rejects hunger, power over self and power over the world (Matthew 4:1-11). What is surprising in this chapter is the way in which Brown configures the four temptations shown. The first temptation is the battle of Menai Strait, in which Magnus chooses a psalter over an axe; the second Magnus's marriage, in which Magnus chooses to remain a virgin; the third the death of his father Erlend, in which he takes up the earldom but ignores the advice of the chancellor Aristius. The first two here are found in all other accounts; the third, while original, is no great departure from the sagas. Throughout, Brown includes his familiar images of cloths and looms and writes in a style as deliberately hagiographic as Mooney or the LMS. In the fourth temptation, however, Brown's focus dramatically shifts. The tempter – and only here is the tempter clearly identified as such – comes in the form of a monk, asking Magnus to renounce the earldom, to retire to a monastery and spend the rest of his life in peace. Departing from hagiographic tradition, it is in this case the tempter who gains the reader's sympathies. If the text is read as preconfigured and the eventual outcome is known, then it is clear that the tempter's plan is, in fact, better than Magnus's, for his forecast is entirely accurate: "There may be worse to come – civil war, mercenaries riding through the cornfields. Murder. Burning. Rape" (*M* 78). Given that all of these events do come to pass, Magnus's response that: "God has made me an earl in this place. [...] My work is a work of peace, to bind up the wounds in the music" (*M* 79),

falls somewhere between arrogance and delusion. It is, after all, not anything Magnus does in life which guarantees peace for the island, but his death. Even the Keeper of the Loom, Magnus's self-appointed guardian, argues on the tempter's side – "Go out on the roads with that sword, Magnus, and you'll lose everything" (*M* 79) – before accepting that "there is no other way" (*M* 80) than that which Magnus eventually chooses.

Brown is here raising a number of complications for conventional interpretations of the story; in depicting Magnus as a man who chooses war, Brown denies the panacea that Mooney and others offer in their insistence that anything Magnus may have done in life which did not befit a saint was only due to the coercion of his friends. The chapter which follows "The Temptations" is "Scarecrow", a telling of the war through the eyes of Jock and Mary and Hild and Mans which is fleshed out from "The Fields in Summer" in *The Loom of Light*. In the earlier play, the soldiers on both sides are bitter and destructive, but it is made clear that the damages inflicted by Magnus's soldiers are against his orders.⁶³ In the novel, however, the earls are made far more culpable: the soldiers not only despoil the fields, but murder innocents. "These mercenaries were evil, which ever side they supported" (*M* 85), writes Brown, but the earls are equally blamed: Mans rages against them both, and, in their equal destruction of his fields, he is shown to be justified (*M* 96). In his positioning of these two chapters, Brown demonstrates that the perceived path to Magnus's martyrdom is also the path towards political discord and war. This raises the necessary issue of value and responsibility: how many men must Magnus's soldiers have killed, Brown seems to be asking, for his death to still be worth the loss of other lives?

Brown is very careful to situate the entire story within a culture of violence and death. The opening of the novel, in its depictions of the daily life of peasants, could read as an echo of, say, *The Return of the Native* were it not for the repeated mention of “scars,” “corpses” and “blood”. The third of the bridal songs which end the chapter also forecasts not redemption so much as death:

What is the lost cry in the heart of the earth?
I am wounded. I have taken a wound in
my flesh. The lips of it will never
come together. Fire has been thrust
deep in the wound. My flesh is branded.
IT IS THE SUN. IT IS THE PLOUGH AND
THE SOWER. (M 28)

Magnus’s path, in Brown’s imagining, is far from glorious. It is instead filled with blood and death, with the sacrifice not only of the saint’s life but that of others. While numerous critics have made note of the “contemporary” setting and style of large portions of “The Killing”, few have examined the ways in which the whole novel is made more contemporary through its refusal to accept simple, unblemished martyrdom. Even as Magnus, Christ-like, resists temptation, his choices lead to the deaths of others as well as widespread peace. The question of sacrifice and responsibility thus takes on a peculiarly modern tint, greatly, if unconsciously, indebted to Søren Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, examines the paradox in which the particular is made higher than the universal through faith. In his willingness to sacrifice his son, Abraham is not a tragic hero, but “either a murderer or a believer”.⁶⁴ The individual act must be seen as a paradoxical suspension of universal ethics in which the act that could possibly fulfil a higher ethical code is also one that defies pre-existing ethics. As Hent de Vries argues, the example of Abraham “shows that in every genuine

decision the ethical *must* be sacrificed”.⁶⁵ Kierkegaard attempts to see how one can admire a man who has forsaken universal ethics in favour of the absolute.

By his act he overstepped the ethical entirely and possessed a higher *telos* outside of it, in relation to which he suspended the former. For I should very much like to know how one would bring Abraham’s act into relation with the universal, and whether it is possible to discover any connection whatever between what Abraham did and the universal [...] except the fact that he transgressed it.⁶⁶

The question then becomes: is an act of faith which goes against common or universal ethics still a worthy act? For Kierkegaard this remains a paradox, one which “does not permit of mediation”.⁶⁷ Abraham, in his sacrifice of Isaac, became, as an individual, higher than the universal through an act of faith. The sacrificing of ethics is that which creates the singular. For Kierkegaard, the “single individual” is he who can make a decision which sacrifices universal ethics; as de Vries points out, the “sole incarnation of this single individual is the martyr”.⁶⁸ The martyr, through sacrifice – both the physical sacrifice of the self and the sacrifice of universal ethics – becomes wholly singular. Jacques Derrida shows how this sacrifice is made not only according to the strictures of faith but also out of duty:

The absolutes of duty and of responsibility presume that one denounce, refute, and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law. It calls for a betrayal of everything that manifests itself within the order of universal generality. [...] In a word, ethics must be sacrificed in the name of duty.⁶⁹

Abraham, then, is not acting ethically, but out of duty to the absolute, which is a greater duty than that to the universal. Yet such an act still requires a “recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming [of] the very thing one sacrifices, namely, the order of human ethics and responsibility”.⁷⁰ For both Kierkegaard and Derrida, then, Abraham’s sacrifice is not only the (averted) one of Isaac, but also one of the “universal ethical sphere” itself.⁷¹

Abraham is ethically dutiful in his unethical actions; because the absolute other (in this case, God) demands the sacrifice of universal ethics, Abraham is able as an individual – and moreover as an individual *martyr* in Kierkegaard's formulation – to transcend ethics.

This is the paradox through which Brown is working in *Magnus*. Magnus chooses a path to sainthood and martyrdom which includes the rape and murder of the people for whom his sacrifice is theoretically made. As is shown in "The Temptations", Magnus wills the destruction of the community in order to save it, thereby suspending himself from any sort of traditional ethics. Brown is distinctly uncomfortable with this elevation of the individual against the community and the universal, yet at the same time, in order to accept Magnus as a saint, he must accept him as distinct from the surrounding community. Yet for Brown, the "singular individual" of the sacrifice also works on behalf of the singular community. Brown places the community and the universal in opposition: the particular and individual community stands against the universal even as it would conventionally embody it. As will be shown below, the notion of sacrifice is deeply entwined with that of the community because only in a suspension of universal ethics can an individual sacrifice serve the good of the individual community. For Brown, universal ethics only allow "peace-making" of the sort Hakon and Magnus's friends propose: a series of deals and temporary solutions. In the mouth of the bishop, Brown places the idea of a higher peace: "Peace-making [...] is at best the patching of an old coat. To make true peace, the *pax Christi*, is to weave the seamless garment" (*M* 119). The peace of Christ is the peace that comes through sacrifice, the sacrifice that, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, is simultaneously "unique [...] and] consummated for all".⁷² And it is in this constant invoking of the seamless garment that Brown finds a solution to the

paradox of individual responsibility in opposition to universal ethics. In Bishop William's homily, "Concerning the Two Coats, of Caesar and of God, that cover Adam's Shame", the first coat, that of Caesar, is the coat of earldom, of power, and of community itself; of the second coat he says nothing, except that it is "woven upon no earthly looms" (*M* 113). For Magnus's sacrifice to be full and sufficient, it is necessary that he wears both coats; his martyrdom can only serve its purpose if he is the embodiment of the community itself; his individual responsibility gains meaning only after he takes on the earldom, and thus becomes responsible for the entire community.

Brown's approach to this paradox of responsibility initially seems like a simplification of Kierkegaard's approach, for surely if Magnus is preordained to do such a thing on behalf of his community, as at least the reader is aware, then the choice is simplified if not completely eliminated. Magnus cannot do other than become a martyr. Brown, however, is instead attempting to redefine what it is to be an individual. For Kierkegaard, in this paradox of Abraham: "the individual as the individual is higher than the universal and as the individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute/or else faith never existed, because it has always existed".⁷³ For Brown, however, the individual is the way in which the universal stands in relation to the absolute: only in the form of the individual who takes on the problems and desires of the community can either approach the absolute. The relation of the self to God and the community can only be on the level of the individual. The faith with which the individual proceeds is an individual matter, one which must constantly be redefined. If Magnus were never to waver, then the matter of faith would, as Kierkegaard insists, become irrelevant. But in depicting the temptations of Magnus *as temptations*, by demonstrating that Magnus has available to

him all of the benefits of being an individual human, and yet chooses this sacrifice, Brown demonstrates that it is through Magnus that the community as a whole comes to a knowledge of the absolute, comes to faith.

Magnus's death must be understood as both martyrdom and sacrifice, then, where the first is an act outside of the particular community in which it takes place and the latter is intrinsically connected to the community. As René Girard has repeatedly shown, the sacrifice of an individual, as a surrogate victim or a scapegoat, serves to remove violence from a community. The individual who is sacrificed must be someone kept at a remove from the given community but intimately known to it, either a slave, such as the Greek *pharmakos* or a king. The act of violence against one individual, in the form of sacrifice, transforms the "violence of all against all [which] would finally annihilate the community [...] into a war of *all against one*, thanks to which the unity of the community is re-established".⁷⁴ Sacrifice is thus a unique and individual act and yet one which at the same time unifies the surrounding community.⁷⁵ It is a suspension of universal ethics which creates, if not the universal community, at least the community as a unified whole. As Girard writes: "The surrogate victim dies so that the entire community, threatened by the same fate [of generalised violence], can be reborn".⁷⁶ Again, in *Magnus* Brown demonstrates that the community is predicated on this individual act. As Nancy writes in his discussion of "early" sacrifice – in this case Jesus and Socrates – the sacrifice of the individual "is not simply unique, therefore, but, by virtue of its uniqueness, elevated to the principle or essence of sacrifice".⁷⁷ Magnus's death is both an individual sacrifice in an individual community and a manifestation of the essence of sacrifice, as will be shown below in a discussion of his apparent transformation into Dietrich Bonhoeffer. What is

clear here is that this death works in at least four ways. Following the saga accounts, Magnus's death is an instance of classic martyrdom, an act which displays the glory of God through the death of the individual believer. It is also primarily an individual act, outside or against universal ethics, insofar as it is a self-sacrifice, one which is willed not by the executioner but by the individual about to die. At the same time, it is an act which unifies the surrounding community: it is only through Magnus's death that peace comes to the Orkneys. Finally, Magnus's death is an example of sacrifice as such, both unique and universal. What remains consistent across all of these interpretations is that the death of Magnus is Brown's primary example of the way in which the individual stands in relation to the community.

D. The Moment and Being of Death

In order to understand fully this sacrifice, it is necessary to explore the ways in which Brown treats the moment of death. "The Killing" is by far the longest chapter in *Magnus*, the most challenging in style and narrative, and also the most elusive, slipping from reportage to anthropological discourse to hagiography without, ultimately, even documenting the moment of Magnus's death. As this is in many respects the most controversial passage in all of Brown's fiction, it demands examination from a variety of angles: from that of style, from that of the meaning of sacrifice as discussed above and, finally, from that of the nature of 'Being-towards-death' in the life of a saint. The chapter, which fills more than a quarter of the novel, is split into ten sections of unequal length. Each section is written in a different register, from apparently wholly separate perspectives. Brown here condenses the stylistic diversity of his portmanteau works such

as *Orkney Tapestry* into one historical moment. It is for this reason that *Magnus* has been hailed as “an assemblage of brilliant fragments”⁷⁸ or, less favourably, is charged with “flout[ing] every convention of the novel”.⁷⁹ Even if the reader accepts the abstraction of previous chapters, which are far more concerned with the depiction of a given period in Magnus’s life (or the life of the community around him) than in narrative causality, the fragmentation in “The Killing” is still surprising and unusual, far closer stylistically to the Circe episode in *Ulysses* than to anything in the *Sagas*. The chapter is wilfully obtuse, at least compared to the rest of Brown’s work, but not to the end of confusing the reader, or causing her to focus unduly on one aspect of the novel. Rather, by interweaving a variety of styles and perspectives, Brown is attempting to demonstrate the apparent timelessness of the story by using both archaic and contemporary narrative styles, and to give the reader something with which she can personally identify. The mixture of styles in “The Killing” is Brown’s attempt to open the novel up to include far more of the world than might originally be seen in an historic tale.

The chapter begins with a short passage written in a pseudo-medieval saga style, one which does not echo any of the known translations of the *Saga* but instead comes closest to Anglo-Saxon pieces of the period: “When that holy season of pasch was overpast, the jarls busked them both for the tryst” (*M* 123). If not perhaps as artful as Joyce’s “Before born babe bliss had. Within womb won he worship”,⁸⁰ Brown’s stylistic shift here serves a similar purpose: it draws the reader’s attention to the very artificiality of style, to the constructed nature of the novel. To that end, Brown introduces a first-person narrator, echoing the “saga-men”, who is understood to be ordering the narrative: “I must tell now concerning the jarl Hakon Paul’s son, how he summoned about him an

host, and set them in eight war-hungry ships” (*M* 123). Brown, in this passage, is clarifying to the reader that the story she is about to read is neither organic, nor a pure historical narrative, but is created towards a specific end. The story of Magnus’s death is important because of the way it is interpreted by later generations; Hakon asks himself: “what would the saga-man say about a furtive cold callous murder (that was how it would be seen, no matter from what root of necessity and realism the act had sprung)?” (*M* 161). In these asides, Brown constantly reminds the reader that there are always multiple levels of interpretation which are not always true to the acts which took place. The novel *Magnus* is itself such an interpretation, as the introduction of the first-person narrator demonstrates: Brown does not presume, as Mooney does, to be telling a wholly honest account of Magnus’s life and death, but instead one that is filtered through time and memory.

The chapter then moves to a style not dissimilar to that employed in the rest of the novel, a looping, hyper-poetic but nonetheless fairly realistic prose: “Oars rose and fell in the firth. The blades shattered the glass with regular plangencies. Circular dark wounds marked the path of the ship *Flame* through the firth, but the sea soon healed itself again” (*M* 123). Brown focuses in this segment on the differentiation between dream and reality and on the frailty of human observation. The sea is apparently calm, but is also filled with a threat that finally emerges in the form of a great single wave, a portent taken from the *Saga*. The wave is preceded by a detailed account of Magnus’s dream of a nuptial wedding, to which he arrives wearing a coat stained with sea-slime, grease and urine, only to remember that a better coat is waiting for him. This dream is interrupted by the coming of the wave. In the *Saga*, Magnus’s response is calm: “‘It’s not surprising that

you should be worried by this,’ said the Earl, ‘for I think it forebodes of my death. [...] We’d better reckon with the possibility that cousin Hakon isn’t going to be entirely honest with us at this meeting.’”⁸¹ Brown’s earl, however, while he interprets the wave as a warning, tells his men to row on so that he can attend to the wedding feast of which he has just dreamed. The border between nature and fate, between dream and reality, has grown blurred, and Brown is again here pointing to the difficulties of interpretation and the flexibility of historical fact. The portent that comes through natural signs is, too, a commonplace figuration of death over time, arguably “foreign both to the cults of the miraculous and to Christian piety”, in Phillippe Aries’s classic formulation.⁸² The wave’s signification of death would thus have been clear to both the sailors and contemporary readers of the earliest accounts, making Magnus’s simultaneous acceptance of its meaning and refusal to heed it all the more strange. Finn Thorkelson, one of the sailors, thinks: “God help the people of Orkney who have an incompetent like this in charge of their affairs. [...] A wedding – a coat for a wedding – for God’s sweet sake!” (*M* 130). This is one of Brown’s less subtle ironies, for in his telling of the story Magnus’s martyrdom is, in fact, “for God’s sweet sake”. Brown gives voice to characters who are ignorant of the greater situation in order to stress the ways in which miracles cannot always be understood, even by their eyewitnesses. The reader’s sympathies are easily split at this point in the chapter: Magnus must now be seen as either a madman, willing his own death in service to a strange dream, or a saint, sacrificing all in order to fulfil a duty which cannot be understood by those around him. Brown presents these two options as fairly as possible; the reader is welcome not to follow Brown’s interpretation of events, nor to believe in Magnus’s sanctity.

To accentuate the ambiguity of the events further, Brown turns to a contemporary newscast style in order to depict the reactions of the local inhabitants to the events on Egilsay. In this segment, the focus is on a “black-out of news” (*M* 130); the inhabitants of Egilsay are notable not for their reactions to the events, but for the way in which they continue their day-to-day activities while these great events are taking place. Even as Magnus walks the island, apologising for the misdeeds that have taken place during his rule, it is only the outside observer, in this case an unidentified news crew, which makes the events noteworthy. Again, in this range of discourses and narrative structures, Brown is foregrounding his own role in constructing the story, in highlighting certain elements and not others. As Michael Stryck argues, the foregrounding of narrativity itself is a fundamental postmodern approach to thinking about the way human relations and communities are established.⁸³ In these three sections of prelude, as well as the mass that follows, the anthropological discussions of the nature of sacrifice, the lengthy treaty-making between Hakon and Magnus and, finally, the transition for the titular killing to a German concentration camp, Brown illustrates the ways in which communities are formed across time, the ways in which patterns emerge which cannot be seen by anyone involved in these events, but only by an outside observer, such as the reader.

This multiplicity of styles and perspectives allows Brown to easily shift between the individual act and its public or communal representation. In his discussion of *Dasein* as Being-towards-death, which will be further explored below, Heidegger argues that the “Self of everydayness is the “they” [which] is constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted.”⁸⁴ If, as has been shown in the disparate writings of Girard and Nancy, sacrifice is a unique act which works towards communal unification, Brown must

depict both sides, the sacrifice in its individuality and the public in its everydayness. The Heideggerian public “they”, through “information services such as the newspaper”, becomes indistinct: not the sum total of all individual Others, but its own Being. The “they” is created through the vehicles of modernity and enlightenment:

Distantiality, averageness, and levelling down, as ways of Being for the “they”, constitute what we know as ‘publicness’ [“die Öffentlichkeit”]. Publicness proximally controls every way in which the world and Dasein get interpreted, and it is always right – not because there is some distinctive and primary relationship-of-Being in which it is related to ‘Things’, or because it avails itself of some transparency on the part of Dasein which it has explicitly appropriated, but because it is insensitive to every difference of level and genuineness and thus never gets to the ‘heart of the matter’ [“auf die Sachen”].⁸⁵

As Dorothea Frede argues, in *Being and Time*: “the experience of coming to terms with our finitude in the *anxiety* of facing up to death is the crucial situation that forces us to wrench ourselves away from domination by the anonymous public understanding”.⁸⁶ This “they” is not the conglomeration of individual others, but a wholly new Being into which the individual *Dasein*, in its everyday Being, is subsumed up until the point of death, or the anxiety preceding that death. The “they” is, in a sense, Being as it is perceived in the world, by the world.

This “they” is what Brown is trying to illustrate in the first three sections of “The Killing”: a public Being into which the individual is subsumed. In the news portion, for instance, Jock and Mary are among the interviewees, but while the reader is more familiar with, and sympathetic to, them than any of the other interviewees, they are “levelled” with the others; individual perspective is immaterial compared to the common medium of news. The reader is implicated in this “they”, as is Brown himself, for it is only in this series of interpretations and perspectives that any understanding of events takes place. The rationale behind the diversity of styles and narrative structures in “The

Killing” is this very inability of the public Being to reach “the heart of the matter”: the reader, the writer, the peasants and the saga-men are always necessarily kept at a distance. Brown writes as he does both to remove that distance, in the hope that in one of the variants the reader will find a way closer to the story’s heart, but also to highlight the impossibility of fully doing so. Martyrdom necessarily remains a mystery, even in a text centred on such a martyr, and Brown does not attempt to explain it or to fully enter into the mystery that is the Self at the moment of death.

Brown’s most serious exploration of this mystery comes not in his depiction of Magnus’s actual death, in which the saint is both replaced by another and the moment of death is unseen and forgotten even by its witnesses, but in his depiction of Magnus’s last mass. This passage is the purest statement of religious faith in Brown’s writing, and also one of the passages in which he is most willing to engage with ambiguity and to abandon the conceptions of Good and Evil which so many critics have highlighted in their readings of this novel. Brown turns first to eternity; even as Magnus trembles at his approaching death, with ashen mouth, he is reminded through his meditation that “the generations, and even the hills and seas, come and go, and only the Word stands, which was there – all wisdom, beauty, truth, love – before the fires of creation, and will still be there inviolate among the ashes of the world’s end” (*M* 138). These considerations of the end of the world lead Magnus to the beginning, for “All time was gathered up into that ritual half-hour, the entire history of mankind, as well the events that have not yet happened as the things recorded in chronicles and sagas. That is to say, history both repeats itself and does not repeat itself” (*M* 139). This is perhaps Brown’s clearest statement of purpose in the novel: the novel, like the mass, exists in order to encapsulate

the “unimaginably complex events of time into the ritual words and movements of a half-hour” (*M* 139). For a novel like *Magnus* to be meaningful to a contemporary audience, in Brown’s understanding, the focus must be not on the specificity of given events, but on observable constants in “the human situation”. History is thus best understood as a symbolic process, both abstract and “a jewel enduring and flaming” (*M* 140). The incorporation of daily life into history, for Brown, comes through Christianity, which “invests the creatures who move among these elements with an incalculable worth and dignity” (*M* 140). Brown’s focus on the community in his telling of the story, on the peasants as well as the earls, is not only an attempt to portray a wider context for these events, but also to imbue them with sacrament. Like the mass, for Brown the novel is a mixture of the symbolic and the sensual. Art thrives on the constants which are made visible through symbolism, but may also incorporate the minor events of history, because the full constancy of human experience cannot be wholly known in the present.

Brown’s work attempts to balance the experience of momentary lives with “the eye of an angel” who would see “the whole history of men” with “the brevity and beauty of this dance at the altar” (*M* 129). (This project is taken up more literally in *Beside the Ocean of Time*, as is discussed in the first chapter.) The novel, like the mass, incorporates all things in anticipation of a full revelation to come. In this he echoes Walter Benjamin, who argues that:

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation á l’ordre du jour* – and that day is Judgement Day.⁸⁷

For Brown, then, history becomes a testament, and the value of events which can only be hinted at in the present will become known only later; the “actions of Everyman [...] reverberate] through the whole web of time” (*M* 141). For Brown, like Benjamin, mankind is not yet redeemed. Just as Benjamin attests to the “weak Messianic power”⁸⁸ in each generation, however, Brown also argues that: “the pain of all history might be touched with healing by a right action in the present” (*M* 141).

While this is the closest Brown ever comes to stating his goals in writing *Magnus*, the section ends almost in repudiation of this philosophical thesis. Magnus rejects the consolations of mass and art alike as he is beset with terror at the prospect of his death: “His spirit was too cold to be warmed any more by that subtle weave of imagery. The Mass today was simply the movements of an old man and a boy” (*M* 141). Magnus is seized by what Derrida terms the *mysterium tremendum*, the “terrifying mystery, the dread, fear and trembling of the Christian in the experience of the sacrificial gift.”⁸⁹ For Derrida, here interpreting Patočka, this moment comes when one is in the moment of becoming a person, “and a person can become what it is only in being paralyzed [*transie*], in its very singularity, by the gaze of God”.⁹⁰ For Magnus, this *mysterium tremendum* is revealed both as the sensuous feeling of tremendous cold and as the symbolic atonement for sins. Magnus, renouncing the pride which has allowed him to arrive at this moment, acknowledges his failings as both a man and an earl: “He offered all that he had left: the peace and the pain” (*M* 145). Magnus, in preparation for death, becomes most wholly himself, even as he becomes “the chosen man [who] might have to mingle himself with the dust” (*M* 141). This moment of reconciliation and fear is found to some extent in the previous accounts of Magnus’s life. In the *Saga*, Magnus is shown

“covering his face with his hands and shedding many tears in the sight of God” before praying “not only for himself and his friends but for his enemies and murderers”.⁹¹ This moment of tears and prayer has been moved in Brown’s account, however, to the scene of the mass in order to demonstrate the intentionality of Magnus’s sacrifice; Brown is insistent on the recognition that this is a meaningful sacrifice because it is fully willed. (In the *Saga*, all that is said about the mass is that “Some people say that Mass was sung for him and he received the sacrament”.⁹²) Magnus’s death gains significance when it is placed in this highly religious, thoughtful context. At this juncture Brown seems willing to lose much of the value he has placed on the individual’s place within the community, and focus solely on the way in which that individual acts on behalf of the community. Magnus’s sacrifice is known, is willed, and thus is changed; it is no longer merely a political expedient or even a religious symbol, but something greater.

Brown is hesitant at this point to make explicit exactly how this sacrifice is made greater and whether it is for the glory of God or the unification of the community. He instead includes an extremely long, formulaic section detailing the bargaining for Magnus’s life. Virtually every paragraph begins the same way: “Finn Thorkelson/Hold Ragnarson/Sighvat Sokk/et al. *said...*”. Although he has abandoned much of the stylistic experimentation of the previous sections, Brown seems to be willing the reader to read this as a court transcript, a series of testimonies about Magnus’s value in the community in which Magnus himself plays no part. This section also marks perhaps the most significant change in the story from both the saga versions and *Orkney Tapestry*. In these earlier versions, Magnus himself offers Hakon three alternatives to his own death (pilgrimage to Rome, exile in Scotland and mutilation in prison); in both *Loom of Light*

and *Magnus*, Magnus is notably absent from the scene. D'Arcy argues that in this alteration Brown "removes this worldly blemish from [Magnus's] martyrdom and underlines the preordained nature of his fate".⁹³ The passage certainly serves to reinforce the innocence of Hakon, clearly seen in every version as willing to accept compromise but finally turned towards death by the persuasion of his councillors. In its strange emphasis on Hakon's golden armband, too, the passage reaches for the symbolic, as, at the moment of decision, "the arm of the man [...] was an intolerable blaze now in the noon sun" (*M* 163), an echo of the flaming jewel of symbolism itself mentioned in the previous section. But too much emphasis has been placed, over the course of the novel, on Magnus's misdeeds for him to be perceived free of worldly blemish at this point, as D'Arcy argues. Instead, Magnus's absence at his own sentence serves to clarify the way in which the sacrifice must be seen as a universal instance as well as a particular one.

Before turning to the actual moment of death, Brown includes a number of discussions of the anthro-historical nature and significance of sacrifice. For Brown, all sacrifice, in all cultures, works towards the same purpose. Sacrifice is as essential to a community as agriculture: it represents the tearing "of long wounds in the earth [...] that is] one of the great discoveries" (*M* 168). At the same time that it is completely physical, sacrifice is also completely symbolic. Animal sacrifice, for instance, prefigures the Christian Eucharist and the doctrine of transubstantiation: "a man eats a dripping sliver of ox imbued with divinity and thereby he (the wayward one) takes into himself both the sweetness and wisdom of the god (in so far as his being can bear such intensities) and also a draught of the dark primitive power of the earth" (*M* 166). Brown here emphasises the gift inherent in sacrifice: the redemption or unification brought by sacrifice is not

deserved by humanity, “the wayward unstable partner” (*M* 165), but is instead a gift which allows humans to achieve a closer relationship with God through the intervention or intercession of the other, what Girard calls the surrogate victim. Brown’s account of the history of sacrifice is teleologically centred on Christ and the Eucharist:

That was the only central sacrifice of history. *I am the bread of life*. All previous rituals had been a foreshadowing of this; all subsequent rituals a re-enactment. The fires at the centre of the earth, the sun above, all divine essences and ecstasies, come to this silence at last – a circle of bread and a cup of wine on an altar. (*M* 169)

Brown writes of how the Eucharist was prefigured by Melchisedec. who brings forth bread and wine when he blesses Abraham (Genesis 14:18). There is nothing in the biblical account which relates directly to Brown’s claim that at this moment “Men uttered new words to one another – ‘pity’, ‘mercy’, ‘love’, ‘patience’, ‘peace’ – as if this new food in some sense quickened their minds and hearts” (*M* 168). Brown’s interpretation is quite clearly manipulated to indicate the Christian Eucharist, and draws on the Pauline notion that Melchisedec allows for Christ, insofar as the latter is a perfected, consecrated high priest (Hebrews 7:26-28). While this account of the nature of sacrifice is not especially well-grounded in anthro-historical or theological tradition and research, it instead reveals that which Brown views as the particular value of sacrifice.

These four short passages on the nature of sacrifice are absolutely central to the novel, for it is in them that the reader can see that Brown is not interested in writing a conventional novel which would follow traditional narrative structures or tap familiar emotional resonances. Brown inserts them then not to further the story, but to make sure that the reader is fully aware of the nature of sacrifice before the sacrifice takes place. Inasmuch as it is the narrative of the life of a given individual, *Magnus* is just as much a

treatise on the nature and value of sacrifice itself and account of why it is that “At certain times and in certain circumstances men still crave spectacular sacrifice” (*M* 170). For Brown, sacrifice is central both to this particular narrative and to all narratives in general because of its simultaneous uniqueness and universality. It is the only possible act which can fully illustrate the interaction between the individual and the community, because it is simultaneously always individual and always communal.⁹⁴ These passages also form a rationale for Brown’s remarkable transition from the twelfth century to the twentieth in the final scene in the chapter, a transition which only works if the reader is fully convinced by Brown’s argument that every example of sacrifice refers back (or forwards) to Christ. This claim is central to the novel: Magnus, like Bonhoeffer, is sacrificed because at times “bread and wine seem to certain men to be too mild a sacrifice” (*M* 170).

The difficulty in this passage may be seen in the way it has been read since; critics such as Elizabeth Huberman and Reilly have been far too willing to accept the guidelines Brown lays out for the understanding of these events. Huberman writes that: “As an historic figure, he becomes the protagonist in an event that transcends history, since his martyrdom now appears as but a single instance in an endlessly recurring pattern. [...] [T]he rite of sacrifice not only recurs eternally, but is eternally required.”⁹⁵ In similarly elevated language, Reilly argues that: “What raises the bloody business above the level of a mafia killing is the sacrificial element, the cross embraced, without which man is lashed, Ixion-like, to a wheel of murder and reprisal”.⁹⁶ Huberman and Reilly are two of the more strident apologists for this interpretation of the novel, in which Brown’s theme of ritual and recurrence is fully embraced and accepted, but many early reviewers are similarly willing to read this portion of the novel as a theological excursus. However, as

is shown above, Brown spends the majority of the novel arguing against such a simple interpretation, striving to impress upon the reader the political and communal implications of Magnus's life and death as well as the religious ones. It is insufficient to regard Magnus's death as merely echoing Christ's; instead, Magnus's death, as portrayed by Brown, must be seen as highlighting the very nature of all human deaths.

In order to address fully the question of how Magnus's life leads towards a certain type of death, and how that death retroactively transforms his life, as throughout the novel Brown claims, it is necessary to explore briefly the Heideggerian notion of Being-towards-death alluded to above. Heidegger here draws upon Meister Eckhart's notion of the centrality of Being as revealed through death: "The martyrs are dead and have lost their *life* but have received *being*".⁹⁷ For Eckhart – in some respects like Kierkegaard after him – martyrdom is the quintessential death because it reveals the way in which death gives being. Heidegger follows and expands this notion in his explication of Being-towards-death, which is the way in which *Dasein* comes to understand itself: "In Being-towards-death, *Dasein* comports itself *towards itself* as a distinctive potentiality-for-Being."⁹⁸ Death is at once that which limits individual possibility – it imposes a finite number of possibilities for the individual life – but at the same time, the recognition of the possibility of death itself gives the individual an understanding of her own specific potentiality. Death is the way in which *Dasein* is separated from its everydayness, from the "they" discussed above. The potentiality-of-Being revealed in death is the foundation of *Dasein*'s coming to an end, and thus the root of the wholeness of *Dasein*: "Dying is something that every *Dasein* itself must take upon itself at the time."⁹⁹ Death is both the fulfilment of an individual life and also the way in which the individual life is made

known as itself. The two-fold aspect of dying, wherein it is both necessarily one's own and where in its opening up of possibility it is marked as separate from merely perishing, make it constitutive of *Dasein*. Death is then a fulfilment of Being, but not, crucially, in a linear sense. It is not the case that, in Being-towards-death, there is Being which reaches fulfilment at the moment of its ending. Rather, there is in the possibility of death an essential "not-yet" which *Dasein* already is, which is necessarily incorporated in Being. Death, and the everpresent possibility of death, is that which gives being. Death reveals that towards which life has always been moving: "The 'ending' which we have in view when we speak of death, does not signify *Dasein*'s Being-at-an-end [Zu-Ende-sein], but a *Being-towards-the-end* [*Sein zum Ende*] of this entity. Death is a way to be, which *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is."¹⁰⁰ Thus life is not a process towards a wholeness which can only be achieved at the moment of death; instead, death creates this wholeness in such a way that life is based upon its possibility. Death is not only anticipated in life, but drawn upon and fulfilled in life itself.¹⁰¹

When death is understood as possibility and as that which necessarily transcends time (for it is the concept of death as linear culmination that critics such as Paul Edwards believe misleads Heideggerian interpreters, causing them to "reify" the moment of death¹⁰²), it becomes apparent why Brown chooses to avoid showing the moment of Magnus's death, and instead fixes the conception of death to a point when Magnus is in preparation, in the *mysterium tremendum*. Magnus's death, although it is a death unlike that of almost all others by virtue of its symbolic value as sacrifice, is something that exists throughout his life. This is not the death-driven understanding of martyrdom that appears in the sagas or in Mooney, in which the events of Magnus's life are given

credence by the knowledge those authors had of his death, which creates their interest in the life that precedes it, but a more complicated understanding in which the possibility of Magnus's martyrdom, as well as the actuality of it, is that which makes Magnus's life whole. Brown does not show the reader Magnus's actual death because his death has been coexistent and awaited throughout his life. Brown thus follows Heidegger in this notion of death as that aspect of one's being which provides wholeness, not at the moment of death, but in the life itself. The final scene in the novel in which Magnus is still alive comes as a coda to the passages on sacrifice. Brown writes that men still desire "spectacular sacrifice":

They root everywhere for a victim and a scapegoat to stand between the tribe and the anger of inexorable Fate.

So Magnus Erlendson, when he came up from the shore that Easter Monday, towards noon, to the stone in the centre of the island, saw against the sun eleven men and a boy and a man with an axe in his hand who was weeping. (*M* 170)

Magnus thus combines Girard's concept of the sacrificial scapegoat as the unifier of the community and Heidegger's notion of death as that which reveals individual potentiality.

At the same time, however, the above passage marks a surprising exit for the titular protagonist of a biographical novel. This is the last moment at which Magnus is shown in the novel, and he is here voiceless, forced into symbolism and transformed by the other into that which the island community requires him to be. Indeed, it is this disappearance which marks the novel as distinctly philosophical, rather than based in narrative efficiency. For Brown, Magnus's death does not need to be shown to the reader, for it already has been shown: every scene which has involved Magnus, and indeed every scene which has not, has made his death manifest. It is not that Magnus could not live other than he did because he was fated to be a martyr, as the sagas would

have it, but that Magnus's martyrdom was not limited to his death, but was instead present throughout his life. It is not the actuality of his death, or the manner of it, which interests Brown: it is the possibility of his death which exists throughout the course of his life which makes Magnus a worthy subject. Magnus's martyrdom, then, is revealed in his Being-towards-death, in his existence as self, far more than in his actual murder on Easter Monday on Egilsay.

And yet Brown does show a death, or at least offers the prelude to another death. Isobel Murray, in her recent introduction to the novel, argues that the concentration camp scene has, in the past, "obscured almost any other questions, but it is a very short passage, easy to magnify out of context".¹⁰³ Indeed, from the early reviews one would think that this passage was the centre of the novel, the stylistic and narrative climax, which it is emphatically not. For Brown, the climax is one of ideas, not events, and is interspersed throughout the course of the novel. The passage is, however, exceedingly different from anything else in Brown's fiction, and for that reason alone deserves careful consideration. It is, to begin with, one of a small handful of first-person narratives, which Rowena Murray takes to carry special symbolic meaning: the style of the passage "brings with it the associations of the executioner's innocence, of Magnus's helplessness, and of the inexorable forces of evil and lust for power which manipulate them both".¹⁰⁴ While a shift to first-person narration is unlikely in any novel to carry that much symbolic weight, it is all the same an important move, for it jars the reader and forces her to take note of the passage as something distinct and removed from the careful discussions of the nature of sacrifice which have preceded it. This passage is the most confrontational in the novel, for its success is dependent on the reader's acceptance of Brown's claims about

the nature of death and time: the shift from Magnus to Bonhoeffer only makes sense if sacrifice is seen as both unique and essential at the same time. Thus, in both stylistic device and narrative placement, Brown is announcing this passage as one he finds especially important. He repeats this sentiment in his autobiography, where he gives this passage the longest textual criticism of any of his work:

such incidents are not isolated casual happenings in time, but are repetitions of some archetypal pattern; an image or an event stamped on the spirit of a man at the very beginning of man's time on earth, that will go on repeating itself over and over in every life without exception until history at last yields a meaning. The life and death of Magnus must therefore be shown to be contemporary, and to have a resonance in the twentieth century. I did not have far to go to find a parallel: a concentration camp in central Europe in the spring of 1944. (*FI* 178-9)

If one accepts Brown's conceptualisation of the novel, then, the Bonhoeffer passage is not merely inserted in order to enliven the novel or to provide another sort of voicing, but for the same philosophical/theological purposes that are found behind the structuring of the rest of "The Killing". The passage is not ultimately intended to add to the novel as a biographical or historical narrative but is instead focused on the emotional and symbolic resonance of sacrifice itself. As much as Brown derided films, this move is far closer to the work of Eisenstein, or even the Chaplin of *Modern Times*, than to the work of those ruralist writers with whom he is most often compared. Alan Bold, one of Brown's staunchest defenders, compares his technique in "The Killing" to Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte*, a technique of "distancing the reader from the cathartic flow of fictional narrative".¹⁰⁵ Whether regarded as a modernist or even postmodernist gesture, Brown is clearly labouring to present the death of Magnus as an event which must be considered both as a singular event and an archetypal one. The moment of sacrifice is

always unique and irreducible, yet in its essence and its communal purpose it can be shown to be always present in human life.

The choice of setting, however, is far from the obvious parallel that Brown claims it to be in his autobiography. Bonhoeffer, whom Brown grudgingly acknowledges as his inspiration (*FI* 179), was indeed being given hagiographic treatment around the time of *Magnus*,¹⁰⁶ and the bare outlines of his death are much as Brown portrays them. Until his death, however, Bonhoeffer's life was closer to a saint such as Columba, if a comparison must be made: a relatively quiet life given to religious contemplation.¹⁰⁷ Killed for his resistance to the Nazi scheme, his death could not be said to have brought peace or miracles any more than that of thousands of other religious resisters. Indeed, by maintaining the principles of the *Magnus* story, by making the narrator of this segment Lifolf the chef, who insists that the events of the concentration camp at which he works "had nothing to do with me" (*M* 171), Brown in affect depoliticises the action.

The German major in *Magnus* proposes that the prisoner must be killed because:

'For years he has spoken about such things as "the brotherhood of man", "the spirit of peace that ought to brood upon all the peoples of the world", "the universal kingdom of love". [...] We wish to show this pure spirit, by means of the butcher's hook, that he is, after all, when all is said and done, an animal like other men.' (*M* 176)

The reader is naturally expected to oppose this killing and to side with the apparent martyr. And yet Brown comes close to undermining this sentiment, for in keeping his protagonist anonymous and inserting this story inside that of *Magnus*, the Bonhoeffer figure becomes merely symbolic. In his desire to show the world as a system of repetitions, Brown robs the events he portrays of much of their individual import. It is tempting to read this passage of the novel as implying that, in their echoing of Christ's

death, the deaths of Magnus and Bonhoeffer have themselves lost their particular import and singularity. This not only counters the bulk of Brown's argument throughout the novel, but also the teachings of Bonhoeffer, who wrote:

So long as we live, so long as we do not know the boundary of life, death, how can we possibly say what life is in itself? [...] Life is not a thing, an entity or concept; it is a person, a particular and unique person, and it is this particular person, not in respect of what this person has in common with other persons, but in the I of this person.¹⁰⁸

The final segment of "The Killing", in its emphasis on the patterns and repetitions of human life and dismissal of individual particulars, refutes the arguments of both Brown and the man he is apparently using as his protagonist. By stripping these sacrifices of their individual worth, their political and emotional resonances, Brown does them a great, if unconscious, disservice.¹⁰⁹

This failure of this passage to adequately represent the sacrifice as both unique and archetypal does not undermine the entire novel, however, for Brown early on sets up the fallibility of a work of fiction. In the Bishop's first letter, written just as Magnus makes his first appearance in the novel, he writes:

'But in the end nothing matters. The chronicler writes his history in the royal palace, but the saga was conceived and "finis" put to it before the beginning of time; and soon enough there will be no one to relish the dark struttings and puppetry of men, for even the gods, the only creators and begetters, are doomed to perish.' (*M* 39)

This passage is not mere apocalyptic despair, but a comment on the way in which the chronicler, or novelist, cannot tell the totality of human life, immersed in it as he is, but only a small, inaccurate part of it. Brown's intent, in his portrayal of Magnus's life as Being-towards-death and in his understanding of a continual death that offers possibility through life by means of its own limitless possibility of impossibility, is not only to

demarcate the life of one man, but of humanity in general. This is the end served by the continual mentions of death, violence and apocalypse. The individual or particular community itself will die, and achieve wholeness through that death, for that “finis” is already present in the lives of both the whole and its constituent parts. (See the discussion of *Greenvow* in chapter four.) This is, finally, why Brown is unable to conceive of Magnus without the community which surrounds him; the individual ultimately stands in for both the specific community and the larger community of a humanity fast approaching its own end. This implied communal *Dasein* is the bravest aspect of the novel, and perhaps the aspect which elevates it to more than a theological treatise: Brown is not looking at the life of Magnus to stand in for the (sacrificial) death of the individual, as it would appear, but for the death of the community itself.

As Maurice Blanchot argues in *The Unavowable Community* (analysed at greater length in chapter five), the sacrifice that founds the community at the same time undoes it. Sacrifice is a gift and abandonment, and thus is “the ordeal that exposes [the community] to its necessary disappearance”.¹¹⁰ Or, as Nancy reads Girard: if the whole of Western culture is determined by sacrifice, then sacrifice must also come to represent “the closure of the West” and the failure of community.¹¹¹ Brown places sacrifice at the heart of the community in order here to examine how a community comes to be unified; it is worth suggesting that his mirroring of Magnus’s death with that of Bonhoeffer, a death which in no way creates a community or puts an end to communal violence, illustrates the impossibility of community in the modern era. Even if one does not take this step, what remains clear from the above discussions of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Girard is that Brown is using the story of Magnus to illustrate the centrality of the

individual life, and thus the individual death, to the workings of community. The individual sacrifice is that which stands against the universal even as it unifies the community; it is a death which is present throughout the life of the individual; and it is one which must ultimately be seen as both unique and archetypal. Brown thus places a tremendous weight on the significance of the sacrifice, using it to unite both disparate works and disparate sequences within each of those works. This weight, however, ultimately allows the reader to see that for Brown it is sacrifice itself which is constitutive of community and which reveals community for what it is. The community is finally that which is predicated on the individual: the story of Magnus does not illustrate a unique moment in religious history, but is a way to understand the workings of community itself.

Despite Brown's life-long interest in the story of Magnus, there are only a few small codas to the novel. Three long poems, "Songs for St Magnus Day" from the 1989 collection *The Wreck of the Archangel*, the stand-alone poem from the same year "Tryst on Egilsay", and "Saint Magnus" from the posthumous 1998 collection *Stained Glass Windows* all make use of the same framework which Brown employs in the longer works discussed above.¹¹² In each of these poems, the focus is not on Magnus himself, but on the community which surrounds him. The first of these poems ends with a general "invocation of the blind and infirm" to Magnus to "keep for us a jar of light / Beyond sun and star".¹¹³ Here the "us" is ultimately inclusive, encompassing not only the poor, or even the people of Orkney, but the readers as well. "Tryst on Egilsay" develops this theme, as well as making use of the stylistic innovation of "The Killing", in dividing the narration equally between Earl Hakon, a helmsman of the ship Magnus takes to Egilsay, the killers, a priest, Magnus himself, two tinkers, and the "men of Egilsay". In the mass

which marks the end of each of Brown's full-length imaginings of the story, the tinkers observe:

– All the world can drink from that cup,
The two tinkers that we are,
And the lord Magnus with the heavy folds about him
And Aud the skipper
And the fisherman with a bunch of herring
And the wife with a loaf from the fire.¹¹⁴

Magnus's death is most significant for the way in which it can unite the individuals of the island, both "high and low". In both of these poems, Brown presents a newly-unified community: this is a community created by sacrifice. "Saint Magnus" presents these themes in a very different style: the poem is narrated by an old woman who is enraged by the way in which the feud between Magnus and Hakon has led to widespread violence. Magnus matters to her not as a martyr or a potential saint, but rather as a political figure whose decisions have led to the deaths of those she loves. Yet Magnus, going off to his death, is able to cure her of her pain as he kisses her on the cheek, "a thing Valt never did / for fear of fishermen's mockery, and old Jon did only / when he was merry with ale at harvest home and Yule".¹¹⁵ Here Magnus's achievement is not on the level of the whole community, but instead comes in the form of affection between two individuals. This poem is suggestive of a new relation between individual and community, but primarily illustrates, like the scenes with Jock and Mary in the earlier works, that moments of great significance do not need to be recognised by the people they affect in order to retain power.

Brown's most significant coda to the novel is found in the short story "The Feast at Paplay" from 1983. While stylistically more traditional than *Magnus*, the story shares its approach to the sagas. Based on Chapter 52 of the *Saga*, the story tells of Hakon's

meeting, after Magnus's murder on Egilsay, with Thora, Magnus's mother and Ingerth, his wife: the moment at which Hakon "began to feel the burden of his crime".¹¹⁶ As in *Magnus*, Brown's primary concern is not with the events of history so much as the surrounding community context: three-quarters of the story is concerned with the preparation for the feast. It begins with the slaughter of a pig, which dies "in floods of gore", echoing the simultaneous, but unknown, death of Magnus.¹¹⁷ As in *Magnus*, violence is understood to be a necessary, daily aspect of community life; Magnus's death, recognised by Ingerth long before Thora, is treated in a subdued manner, like that of any other man on the island. "Men die. Never a day but a man dies in this island or that. So long as this dead man in Egilsay was shriven and given heavenly bread for his journey, then he's happy enough, I'm sure."¹¹⁸ Although Thora does not know that it is her son of whom she is speaking, she is at this moment forgiving Hakon, for she accepts Magnus's death as part of a larger pattern. The majority of the story is concerned with her distress at Ingerth's refusal to celebrate Easter fully:

'The Lord is risen [...] Does that mean nothing to you? Of course it means nothing, if one does not see all the actions of Christ's life in the events of every day. Today in the island of Egilsay your husband and his cousin – the two earls – who have been on bad terms for years, they are holding a meeting. [...] Orkney that has been bleeding to death for many winters, that is dead in fact and laid in a hollow rock; Orkney is to be resurrected again this very day. Does that mean nothing to you?'¹¹⁹

Thus Brown makes explicit the link between Magnus and the community at large; his death both symbolises the death of the community and, although Thora does not know this, will result in its resurrection, and in the return of peaceful life. The death of Magnus serves to prove "that it is Christ who rules the universe, not Fate".¹²⁰ As with *Magnus*, the story is impossible to understand if Magnus's death is not understood as a

Christological sacrifice, and if the individual is not seen as representative of the community. If these precepts were not taken into account, “The Feast at Paplay” would merely be a rather strange story about a mother who is not concerned with grieving for her son. Instead, by assuming the symbolic account of Magnus’s death, Brown is using the story to explore further the ways in which the martyrdom impacts upon everyone within the community, even allowing for peace between his mother and his murderer. For Brown, this is the first of Magnus’s miracles: while Ingerth is filled with nothing but hateful invectives, Thora calls Hakon “son”. After Magnus’s death, *all* of the violence on the island seems to come to a halt, and situations which should lead to violence become peaceful.

Brown ends the story with one of his favourite ambiguously symbolic images: “On the half-finished cloth in the loom could be seen now, in the torchlight, a sun, a cornstalk, a cup”.¹²¹ These are, of course, both the images of daily life and of the Christian Eucharist. If this story is to be read as a coda to *Magnus*, then it becomes clear that this loom contains the wedding garment for which Magnus searches up until his death. Not only is it a garment filled with symbolism, but it is, in effect, a priestly garment, woven with the images of a Eucharistic robe. Although Magnus is mentioned in many of the poems and stories Brown wrote after *Andrina*, he gradually became interested primarily in the story’s most purely symbolic elements. A poem like “St Magnus”, written shortly before his death, tells the entirety of the novel in twenty-eight lines; the change from a white coat to “a red martyr coat” becomes the drama of the narrative, rather than any of the story’s events.¹²² Similarly, in “St Magnus Day 1992”, Brown writes:

But the poor still dance (thank God).
Because of the saints
We, a throng out of winter,
Dance now in coats brighter than Solomon.¹²³

The repetitive image of coats and sacrifice, in these later poems, gets somewhat muddled. The events described have, perhaps, grown so familiar to Brown that they are no longer worth explaining, and he instead rewrites the story focusing only on its thematic elements, ignoring its dramatic and historical basis. It is, ultimately, only in *Magnus* that Brown is able to explore the nature of Magnus's death, the way in which the individual comes to serve on behalf of, and as representative of, the community and the way in which the life of the community becomes a single entity through the life of one member.

It is finally worth mentioning the primary medium through which *Magnus* has become known to a wider audience, Peter Maxwell Davies's *The Martyrdom of Saint Magnus*. In his libretto, Davies sticks quite closely to the novel, often, in scenes such as "The Reporters", providing a word-for-word setting of the material. The only notable change is in the character of Blind Mary, who seeks, and accepts, her own restoration of sight. The finale of the opera consists of a declaration on the nature of sacrifice repeated from Brown's chapter "The Killing", followed by an explicit inclusion of the audience, who are told, upon leaving, to "Go now and carry the peace of Christ into the world".¹²⁴ Davies makes explicit what Brown is content to leave implicit, and the story perhaps becomes slightly less dramatic for losing the ambiguity Brown has worked into it. The libretto does serve, however, to illustrate how, for all of his sometimes unwieldy symbolism and the repetition of a few elements to the point where they almost become meaningless, Brown was largely able to create an ambiguous, ambitious account of the death of an individual and the way that death impacts upon the surrounding community, a

theme on which he was often focused but never to the same degree of success as in *Magnus*.

NOTES

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- ¹ For purposes of clarity, except in the cases of direct quotations from alternate sources, all names will correspond to the spellings in Brown's novel *Magnus*.
- ² Julian D'Arcy, Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1996) 262.
- ³ John Mooney, St. Magnus – Earl of Orkney (Kirkwall: W.R. Mackintosh, 1935) 3.
- ⁴ Brown, Collected Poems 291.
- ⁵ Mooney 11.
- ⁶ Alexander Burt Taylor, introduction, The Orkneyinga Saga, trans. Taylor (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1938) 8.
- ⁷ Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (1978; London: Penguin Classics, 1981) 81.
- ⁸ Orkneyinga Saga 95.
- ⁹ Orkneyinga Saga 71.
- ¹⁰ Orkneyinga Saga 108. This passage is also used as part of the Pálsson and Edwards translation's dedication to George Mackay Brown.
- ¹¹ Taylor 72.
- ¹² Robin Waugh, "Saint Magnús's Fame in Orkneyinga Saga," Journal of English and German Philology 102.2 April 2003: 166.
- ¹³ "Magnus' Saga the Longer," The Orkneyingers' Saga, trans. G.W. Dasent (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office (Eyre and Spottiswoode), 1894, vol. 3 of Icelandic Sagas and Other Historical Documents Relating to the Settlements and Descents of the Northmen on the British Isles, Under the Direction of the Master of the Rolls, 4 vols, 1887-94) 239. Hereafter cited as LMS.
- ¹⁴ This is not, as it might appear, related to the different period of translation; Dasent's translation of the *Orkneyinga Saga* in the same volume is not substantially different from that of Pálsson and Edwards.
- ¹⁵ LMS 240.
- ¹⁶ W.P. Ker, rev. of Icelandic Sagas Vols. 3 and 4, The English Historical Review 11.41 Jan. 1896: 140.
- ¹⁷ LMS 241, 247.
- ¹⁸ George M. Brunsden, "Earls and Saints: Early Christianity in Norse Orkney and the Legend of Magnus Erlendsson," History, Literature, and Music in Scotland, 700-1560, ed. R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 69.
- ¹⁹ Magnus' Saga: The Life of St. Magnus Earl of Orkney 1075-1116, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Oxford: Perpetua Press, 1987) 45. Hereafter cited as SMS.
- ²⁰ LMS 264.
- ²¹ LMS 265.
- ²² LMS 269.
- ²³ LMS 269-70.
- ²⁴ Taylor 95.
- ²⁵ Taylor 96.
- ²⁶ Mooney 247.
- ²⁷ Mooney 9.

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- ²⁸ Mooney 19.
- ²⁹ See also D'Arcy 267.
- ³⁰ Mooney 90.
- ³¹ Mooney 211.
- ³² Mooney 265.
- ³³ D.P. Thomson, Orkney Through the Centuries: Lights and Shadows of the Church's Life in the Northern Isles (Perth: Munro Press, 1956) 7.
- ³⁴ George Mackay Brown, Magnus (London: Hogarth Press, 1973) 111. Hereafter cited in text as *M*.
- ³⁵ Waugh 177.
- ³⁶ Brunsten 80.
- ³⁷ George Mackay Brown, Vinland (London: John Murray, 1992) 195. Hereafter cited in text as *V*.
- ³⁸ Rowena Murray, "The Influence of Norse Literature on the Twentieth-Century Writer George Mackay Brown," Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference, 1984, ed. Dietrich Strauss and Horst W. Drescher (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1986) 550.
- ³⁹ Orkneyinga Saga 103.
- ⁴⁰ Murray and Murray 231.
- ⁴¹ Donald Campbell, "Greenness in Every Line: The Drama of George Mackay Brown," International Journal of Scottish Theatre 1.1 June 2000, accessed 9 Oct. 2006, <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/ijost/Volume1_no1/D_Campbell.htm>.
- ⁴² George Mackay Brown, Three Plays (London: Chatto & Windus/Hogarth Press, 1984) 3.
- ⁴³ In the novel, "Seedtime" is known as "The Plough", "The Fields in Summer" as "Scarecrow" and the chapter "The Temptations" is new.
- ⁴⁴ Schoene 221.
- ⁴⁵ Brown, Plays 4.
- ⁴⁶ Brown, Plays 9.
- ⁴⁷ Brown, Plays 47.
- ⁴⁸ LMS 242.
- ⁴⁹ Brown, Plays 11.
- ⁵⁰ Brown, Plays 14.
- ⁵¹ Brown, Plays 11.
- ⁵² Brown, Plays 15; Brown, Magnus 48.
- ⁵³ Brown, Plays 41.
- ⁵⁴ Brown, Plays 42.
- ⁵⁵ Brown, Plays ix.
- ⁵⁶ D'Arcy 265.
- ⁵⁷ Brown, Plays x.
- ⁵⁸ George Mackay Brown, Letters from Hamnavoe (Edinburgh: Gordon Wright, 1975) 86.
- ⁵⁹ Margaret Cormack, "Murder and Martyrs in Anglo-Saxon England," Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion, ed. Cormack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 63.

⁶⁰ Brunsden 75.

⁶¹ Patrick Reilly, "Catholics and Scottish Literature," Modern Scottish Catholicism 1878-1978, ed. David McRoberts (Glasgow: Burns, 1979) 183.

⁶² Schoene 217 [italics mine].

⁶³ Brown, Plays 25.

⁶⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, 1843, trans. Walter Lowrie (1941; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 67.

⁶⁵ Hent de Vries, Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) 158.

⁶⁶ Kierkegaard 69-70.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard 77.

⁶⁸ de Vries 163.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, The Gift of Death, 1992, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 66-7.

⁷⁰ Derrida, The Gift of Death 67.

⁷¹ Mark Dooley, The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) 202.

⁷² Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," trans. Richard Stamp and Simon Sparks. A Finite Thinking, ed. Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) 57.

⁷³ Kierkegaard 91.

⁷⁴ René Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 1999, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001) 24. Italics in original.

⁷⁵ Although discussion of sacrifice in this chapter is closely tied to martyrdom, a substantially different form of sacrifice appears throughout Brown's work in his versions of the story of Storm Kolson, presented in most detail in the play A Spell for Green Corn (London: Hogarth Press, 1970). The death of the girl Sigrid, burned as a witch, leads to the resurrection of the community. As the blind fiddler says: "One cold act of beauty [...] might yet flush the hill with ripeness" (62). Here the sacrifice is presented in a manner much closer to that described in Girard than Magnus's death: it is only an innocent, drawn from the community, who can guarantee the community's survival. Yet here, too, the sacrifice is fundamentally Christological. In the appendixes attached to the play, Storm Kolson's notebook reads: "A few must vanish in terror to keep the nets full. When the wounds of Christ are forgotten, a new saint must offer hands and feet and side. The poet, when the worm is in the corn, must lose his way in the street of images between the plough and the oven" (84). As in Magnus, then, individual sacrifice works toward the good of the community not only in the suspension of ethics – for throughout the play, the burning of Sigrid as a witch is condemned as cruel and misguided – but also as a (here unwitting) echo of the life of Christ.

⁷⁶ René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 1972, trans. Patrick Gregory (London and New York: Continuum, 2005) 269.

⁷⁷ Nancy, "Unsacrificeable" 58.

⁷⁸ "Et in Orcadia," rev. of Magnus, by George Mackay Brown, Times Literary Supplement 23 September, 1973: 1101.

⁷⁹ Isobel Murray, introduction, Magnus, by George Mackay Brown (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1998) vii.

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- ⁸⁰ James Joyce, Ulysses, 1934, (New York: Vintage International/Random House, 1990) 384.
- ⁸¹ Orkneyinga 92.
- ⁸² Philippe Aries, Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 4.
- ⁸³ Michael Stryick, "The End of Community and the Politics of Grammar," Cultural Critique 36 Spring, 1997: 196.
- ⁸⁴ Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, 1927, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 2004) 296.
- ⁸⁵ Heidegger, Being and Time 165.
- ⁸⁶ Dorothea Frede, "The Question of Being: Heidegger's Project," The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 57. Italics in original.
- ⁸⁷ Benjamin, Illuminations 246.
- ⁸⁸ Benjamin, Illuminations 246.
- ⁸⁹ Derrida, Gift of Death 6.
- ⁹⁰ Derrida, Gift of Death 6.
- ⁹¹ Orkneyinga 94-5.
- ⁹² Orkneyinga 95.
- ⁹³ D'Arcy 269.
- ⁹⁴ Indeed, as Miguel de Beistegui argues, the "properly Western sacrifice is *self-sacrifice*" precisely because it is through the sacrifice of the individual that that the community can experience "what cannot be constituted in community", which is the "sacrifice of community". Miguel de Beistegui, "Sacrifice Revisited," On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy, ed. Darren Sheppard, Simon Sparks and Colin Thomas (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 159, 165.
- ⁹⁵ Elizabeth Huberman, "George Mackay Brown's Magnus," Studies in Scottish Literature 16 1981: 128-9.
- ⁹⁶ Reilly 193.
- ⁹⁷ Meister Eckhart, Selected Writings, trans. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin Classics, 1994) 165. Italics in original.
- ⁹⁸ Heidegger, Being and Time 296.
- ⁹⁹ Heidegger, Being and Time 284.
- ¹⁰⁰ Heidegger, Being and Time 289.
- ¹⁰¹ "Life" here is used more conventionally than in Heidegger, who nonetheless does argue that "Even Dasein may be considered purely as life." – Being and Time 290.
- ¹⁰² Paul Edwards, "Heidegger and Death as 'Possibility'," Mind NS 84.336 Oct. 1975: 563.
- ¹⁰³ Murray, Isobel x.
- ¹⁰⁴ Murray, Rowena 554.
- ¹⁰⁵ Alan Bold, George Mackay Brown (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1978) 106.
- ¹⁰⁶ The most arresting element of Mary Bosanquet's 1968 biography of Bonhoeffer (Mary Bosanquet, The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968).) is that, like the Bonhoeffer episode in *Magnus*, it begins and ends in

aporia, at the moment of expectation and *mysterium tremendum*, rather than ever discussing the death itself.

¹⁰⁷ This is, at least, the conventional view. The contemporary American writer Marilynne Robinson has in recent years offered a convincing reading of Bonhoeffer's life as continual confrontation with authority; see especially Marilynne Robinson, The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought (1998; New York: Picador, 2005).

¹⁰⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 1949, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (London: SCM Press, 1955) 188.

¹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer's death is also an unsatisfactory parallel to that of Magnus because it does not bring the communal peace and resurrection which Brown argues are an essential result of sacrifice. There is little reason to single out Bonhoeffer's death among the millions who died in concentration camps, and to do so suggests an overly-schematic reading of history.

¹¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, 1983, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988) 15.

¹¹¹ Nancy, "Unsacrificeable" 54. See note 92 above.

¹¹² A late play, A Celebration for Magnus (Nairn, Balnain Books, 1987), similarly offers little new insight.

¹¹³ Brown, Collected Poems 231.

¹¹⁴ Brown, Collected Poems 297.

¹¹⁵ Brown, Collected Poems 390.

¹¹⁶ Orkneyinga Saga 96.

¹¹⁷ George Mackay Brown, Andrina and Other Stories (1983; London: Granada Books/Triad Panther, 1984) 106.

¹¹⁸ Brown, Andrina 123.

¹¹⁹ Brown, Andrina 108-9.

¹²⁰ Brown, Andrina 114.

¹²¹ Brown, Andrina 124.

¹²² Brown, Northern Lights 28-9.

¹²³ Brown, Collected Poems 446.

¹²⁴ Peter Maxwell Davies, libretto, The Martyrdom of St. Magnus, Music Theatre Wales and Scottish Chamber Opera Ensemble, cond. Michael Rafferty (Unicorn-Kanchana, 1990) 20.

Chapter 3

Symbolic Histories: *Time in a Red Coat* and *Vinland*

If *Magnus* and *Beside the Ocean of Time* are Brown's attempts to demonstrate the ways in which history can coalesce around or be understood in regards to a given individual or community, then his other two major late works of fiction, *Time in a Red Coat* and *Vinland*, serve as explorations of the way in which history can also exist as a force in its own right.¹ The protagonists of these two novels are kept at a remove both from history and community; in this separation they are best understood not as fully-formed individuals, but instead as observers of larger social forces. These two novels highlight patterns of human behaviour across long periods of time; they are Brown's least parochial works, but nevertheless echo some of his most familiar themes, in particular the tension between the individual and the communal. Both novels are schematic, heavily symbolic, and not overly concerned with either narrative structure or character development, and it is for this reason that they are undoubtedly the least popular of Brown's longer fictions.² Both novels are largely conceptual, even philosophical, and concerned with reflections on the nature of the historical novel as such. These novels, especially *Time in a Red Coat*, form a response to the familiar charges that Brown's work only romanticises the past, that it creates a falsely idyllic myth of an anti-modern Orkney and is thus unable to address modern concerns. In these two works, one set across hundreds of years and the other incorporating virtually every aspect of Viking life, Brown charts humanity's growing ease with violence and predicts its imminent destruction. Simultaneously, however, both novels are concerned with the ways in which history transforms into, and can be best understood through, myth. While best read as companions to Brown's more fully-developed fictions, they remain the most searching

explorations in Brown's work of the potential failures and distractions of mythology, as well as the potential benefits of interpreting history through the filter of myth. Brown explicitly engages with the question, posed by Hayden White, of "whether historical events can be truthfully represented as manifesting the structures and processes of events met with more commonly in certain kinds of 'imaginative' discourses".³ Both novels are primarily concerned with the intersection of history and myth in order to draw attention to the role of narrative itself. These two novels, then, while clearly "historical" in form, are also perhaps the most modern of Brown's career: they consistently raise the questions of how it is that history is to be understood in modern life and what it is that historically-based texts can successfully teach the modern reader.

In *Time in a Red Coat*, Brown raises the same questions about the nature of subjective experience in regards to history that can be found in the later works of Heidegger. For Heidegger and many of his followers, the self is not a being within history. Instead, the way in which one understands time and history defines the very being of the self and being in general. Brown's novel may in fact be best understood not as a text with conventional narrative aims, but as a series of questions on human nature and violence framed in the dual contexts of historical narrative and fairy-tale sensibility, coupled with a discourse on the nature of fiction in general. Given the philosophical and self-reflexive premises of Brown's later fiction, it is necessary to engage in a fuller discussion of some strains of twentieth-century philosophies of art and history before engaging fully with Brown's novels. For thinkers as diverse as Heidegger and Jameson, the closely intertwined concepts of art and history must be separated from their foundationalist conceptions, in which they are thought of as conduits of truth, in order to

be usefully understood. Art must be understood as the work itself, and through the work it does, rather than being seen as something static and whole in itself, such as a picture or an historical document. For Heidegger, the work opens the distinction between earth and the world: the work is something distinctly temporal. As will be shown below, it is this notion of the work as that which, through its temporality, allows us to distinguish between historicity and history that determines Heidegger's concerns. This notion is also found in Brown's novels.

Within these two novels, Brown foregrounds the ways in which history is represented in art in order both to demonstrate the loss of art as an immediate bearer of truth and to explore what possibilities for truth remain to the modern writer.⁴ He is thus engaged with those concerns which Heidegger makes explicit: for the latter, if the past is viewed objectively, as something which must be represented to the subject – that is, something which has no function outside of its self-representation – then it can hold no truth, but can only be mourned as something now necessarily separated from that conception of truth. In “The Age of the World Picture” Heidegger examines the changing notion of art in contemporary life: as Being becomes defined as that which can be represented to the mind of a subject, the value of art becomes subjective and/or aesthetic, rather than functioning as an arena for the emergence of truth.⁵ In this, argues Anthony Cascardi, Heidegger is heir to Hegel, for whom, “Art in its original sense, as an immediate bearer of truth, is impossible in the modern age; moreover the consequences of this impossibility determine our relationship to the past as one of a loss that is coupled with an impossible desire to grasp the truth in a sensuously immediate form”.⁶ Within the rise of a scientific understanding of the world, art, as the bearer of truth, is replaced

by history, which is representational. For Heidegger, that which is objectified and made representational cannot be a bearer of the truth. This movement towards objectification in effect anaesthetises history; the past becomes something that can be used for representational or explanatory purposes, but not for the emergence of truth. This is not only a comment on the Hegelian and Heideggerian predilection for ancient, especially Greek, art, but on the emergent ahistoricity of history itself. As Jameson argues, one engages with history not to discover “the ‘truth’ of the philosophical description [... but] the situation which suddenly allows the veil to be ripped away from this intolerable ontological bedrock”.⁷ For Jameson, the loss of historicity allows, through the rejection of an ontological or metaphysical foundationalism, the emergence of a view of the past as abstract and indeed mysterious. For Heidegger, a fixation on history as a representational and concrete “It was” creates a fixity of thought which ignores temporality.⁸ Although they are working towards substantially different ends, both Heidegger and Jameson reject the notion that history (as object or representation) can be thought of as a form or bearer of truth – for Heidegger, that which is unconcealed – but instead argue that any discussion of history must incorporate the loss of historicity.

For Hegel as well as Heidegger, modern art is inherently ahistorical. In his work on ahistoricity and the historical novel, Lukács cites the influence of Goethe on Hegel: for Goethe, “all that has remained of true poetry lives and breathes only in anachronisms”.⁹ This claim echoes Hegel’s notion that literature does not change the inner substance of the historical matters with which it is concerned, but changes the expression of that substance in order to fulfil the needs of a contemporary culture. For Lukács, it is only when the past is portrayed as the “necessary prehistory of the present”,

that the necessity of anachronism becomes clear. Lukács uses this Hegelian argument in defence of an historical novelist such as Scott, who simply allows “his characters to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done”.¹⁰ For Scott, this “intermingling [of] fiction with truth” is necessary to make the historical novel relevant to the contemporary reader: “It is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in”.¹¹ Lukács, following Scott, argues that the relevance of an historically-based text does not lie in its historical accuracy, but in the truth it can convey about the present. While Lukács does not claim to see art as a filter, in his discussion of Scott that is clearly what the work of art has become: a tool of translation between cultural idioms. As filtered through both the author and the audience, this translation is necessarily subjective and thus art is still kept at a remove from being a direct bearer of truth.

For Heidegger, nature and history are objectified in the drive to represent something’s Being, just as art is made subjective: they become “the objects of a representing that explains”.¹² As Heidegger interprets Hegel, the latter “experienced the essence of history in terms of the essence of being in the sense of absolute subjectivity”, yet “To this day there has been no experience of history that, seen philosophically, could respond to this experience of history”.¹³ For Heidegger, history cannot relate directly to the experience of being. Instead, he posits an intermediary stage of “reflection” which “transports the man of the future into that ‘between’ in which he belongs to Being and yet remains a stranger amid that which is”.¹⁴ This transitory stage is in effect a way to escape

the stratifying nature of modern life, in which history can only be examined in a certain way (objectively, as what is past). This reflective stage also allows us to approach art as the work, rather than as something limited by its aestheticisation. There is, then, in this essay, a hope for an art which works through history without limiting it to what is past and “set in place”, to what is objective, but which actively reflects Being itself. Art, in its unlimited and eternal form, without modern constrictions, does not reflect or represent a pre-existing truth, but instead is itself “the becoming and happening of truth. [...] [T]ruth [...] happens in being composed.”¹⁵ For this reason, when Heidegger writes of the creation of a work of art, he speaks of emergence, of pulling forth: “to create is to cause something to emerge as a thing that has been brought forth.”¹⁶

Truth is itself, however, necessarily ahistorical. As Heidegger writes, “The establishing of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again”.¹⁷ The aestheticisation of art is that which lets the nonsensuous “shine through”,¹⁸ but Heidegger cautions that it may not be impossible to enter into the poetic experience.¹⁹ Instead, in the modern or scientific era, truth is approached not through the work of art that is the “becoming and happening of truth”, but through the objectification and representation of nature and history. Within Heidegger’s late work there is a divide between what the work of art should and must do – that is, cause truth to emerge – and the demands of a scientific approach, which relies on objectification. Heidegger thus sets up a role for the work of art which he immediately makes impossible even as he insists that it must come to pass. This tension, if not his conclusions, will occupy the rest of the chapter: Brown and the various critics and philosophers discussed question how it might be possible for either art or history – and,

moreover, for history *as* art – to represent or bear truth, especially when truth itself becomes an impossible concept. Heidegger offers no solutions, but instead quotes Hölderlin’s poem “To the Germans” as an example of the way in which history and art can combine towards truth:

How narrowly bounded is our lifetime,
We see and count the number of our years.
But have the years of nations
Been seen by mortal eye?

If your soul throbs in longing
Over its own time, mourning, then
You linger on the cold shore
Among your own and never know them.²⁰

Art with this understanding is thus a way out of the “narrow bounds” of an individual lifetime, for reflection allows a knowledge of modernity that incorporates the past and is not limited to what can be experienced in the lifetime of a given individual. The past becomes concealed through subjective experience, and it is art that creates the process of unconcealing. For Hölderlin, as interpreted by Heidegger, art rooted solely in a subjective experience of modernity leads to mourning; the gaze of an individual life is necessarily insufficient to encounter fully or understand the past. Yet the emergence of subjectivism also raises the question of community. As Heidegger writes: “only where man *remains* subject does the positive struggle against individualism and for the community [...] have any meaning”.²¹ Heidegger thus proposes a tear between art, which must transcend the subjective individual, and the community, which is dependent on the subjective individual. (This view will be contrasted below with Nancy’s claim that “history is community”.) The question of art and history’s relation to the truth is thus

also finally a question of the individual's relation to the community, a question that Brown reformulates throughout *Time in a Red Coat*.

A. Symbol and Allegory in *Time in a Red Coat*

Within *Time in a Red Coat* Brown addresses the way in which, in a Heideggerian manner, art can be drawn forth from truth in two ways: through an analysis of art as such, specifically in literary tropes, and through a focus on mythic elements. The novel is not an attempt to portray the truth of historical incident so much as it is a series of questions concerning how truth could possibly be portrayed. It is best read as a novel of doubt in which neither myth, nor historical realism, nor any form of art is enough to portray the truth fully, but must nevertheless be accepted as the best possibility for any potential unconcealment of the truth. In the novel, Brown adopts a fairy-tale structure, one which the reader can easily recognise as artificial and non-naturalistic, in order to demonstrate that everything which follows in the novel is witnessed through a set of layers, filters and interpretations. For Brown, it is impossible for the truth to be clearly revealed in the form of an historical novel; the fantastic is as appropriate, and as arbitrary, a form to unconceal truth as the realistic. At the start of the novel, the introductory Masque, a dumb puppet show representing the history of the heroine's village, gives way to the breaching of "The Wall": a mythologized past gives way to an intrusive present, and art gives way to violence. This shift does not show that real life is "an illusion", as Hilda Spear claims,²² but instead is used by Brown to reveal the poles between which his heroine will hover over the course of the novel: mythology, peace and art on the one hand, and immediate violence and the difficulty of history as lived experience on the other. "Real life" is just

that: real, present and deadly, but the presence of myth is always at play as a way of interpreting life that both reflects on the given moment and incorporates it into a larger notion of history. Neither myth, which serves as a form of reflection, nor actual experience are capable of revealing the truth single-handedly; for Brown it is only in their combination that any truth may be approached.

To this end, the nameless heroine is given a White and Black Guardian. The White Guardian represents sun, music, “the fullness of the earth”, “the ancient poems and tales”; the Black Guardian promises death, “long labour, full of pain” and dragons that will “scorch you to the bone”.²³ Modernity, in Brown’s fairy-tale-like conception, is overseen by the Black Guardian and his promises of dragons (hereafter used to represent all human violence): “The dove has left this garden. It is now the time of the dragon” (*TRC* 15).²⁴ The mythological world guarded by the White Guardian (notably centred on the very elements of Brown’s Orkney-based fictions) has given way to violence and destruction. Throughout the remainder of the novel, Brown examines those elements of a mythologized past which are still present in modernity, and sees what possible utopia may exist in the future. By grounding the story in the sensibility of a fairy-tale, Brown allows himself to mingle history and myth as much as he desires; it is a way of expressing a non-objectified history and possibly a way to refute the bounds of modern perspective. In this respect, comparisons have frequently been drawn with modern fantasists ranging from Peake²⁵ to Tolkien,²⁶ both of whom constructed elaborate fantastical worlds which subtly echo contemporary life. Brown himself, in an article written for *The Independent* some years after the novel’s release, argued that “such a tale does not call for a naturalistic treatment”, in part because it is not drawn from his own

life: “the book is not realistic, because I have hardly stirred a foot out of my own islands: Orkney. It is more a sombre fable than the novel that people expect to read nowadays.”²⁷ In his drafts for this article, Brown alternates between calling the novel a fairy-tale, a fable, or “high fantasy”: what is crucial in his own reading of the work is that it avoids a realistic approach in order that it can more fully comment on greater tropes across human history. The novel cannot be read purely as myth, however: it is far too concerned with the actuality of lived experience, past and present. The fairy-tale elements of the novel are only revealed in contrast with the realistic elements: they are used to support Brown’s claims about the way the world really is, rather than to distract the reader in an escapist manner. The use of a fantastical lexicon and setting can thus be seen as a liberation of perspective, a way of providing commentary on the world around one that does not directly invoke it.

What Brown does with this dual perspective is not, perhaps, as consistently engaging as the reader would hope. His narrative traces his heroine, unchanged except for her white coat, which is covered with blood and grime by the novel’s end, from medieval Asia to an Orkney-like island, Ottervoe, sometime in the near future. The novel can initially be read as the story of how a given individual can “walk among the flames of hell, and come back, and be sound again in her flesh and mind” (*TRC* 226). Such an interpretation is supported by the apparent triumph of the White Guardian at the novel’s end, when the novel moves into a more familiar pastoral mode and the passage of the girl through the novel is told as pure fairy-tale. Ottervoe itself falls into the template of Brown’s writings on the Orkneys: there is a “strict and mild” factor (*TRC* 230); even when faced with emigration, the children still play “bright-limbed and shrill-tongued,

among the rock-pools and the dunes and the seabirds” (TRC 232); there is still “a great intimacy between sea and fishermen” (TRC 236). The life of the island community has apparently resisted change, even as it is continually confronted with it. The return of Simon Thorfinnson, a small figure in a Napoleonic battle that occupies much of the novel’s second half, to his home community is presented as a small triumph: in a novel about the impossibility of continuance in a violent world, here is a man who has managed to achieve his desire. (That this may, in fact, occur some hundred years after his death is apparently not a great concern for Brown.) Community is here presented quite simply as a force of constancy: it is that from which the individual comes and to which he redemptively returns. Yet even in that redemption, one which is echoed at the finale of *Beside the Ocean of Time*, there is a voice of despair, as the girl – now an old woman named Maurya who has hung up her coat – tells her grandson that: “‘It’s a lie, like all stories. For even the sea was burnt at last. All broken, the harps and the mirrors. An island strewn with skulls. I am a stone mouth that speaks. There’s no need for you or anyone to listen any more’” (TRC 249). The images she uses are deliberately fantastic, pointing as it were to stories which have not yet been told. If all stories are lies, the woman implies, there is no point in telling them at all. Schoene points to the very end of the novel, a few paragraphs later, in which a child claims that “‘Yes, we got history again, of course. The kettle’ll soon be singing’” (TRC 249), as a refutation of the heroine’s claims, an intervention of perspective that ends the novel “on a positive note.”²⁸ This interpretation does not adequately address what has come before, however, for if the heroine’s struggle is to be trusted, it leaves the reader with the knowledge that myth is ultimately not enough to re-establish history. In this refutation of the heroine’s

experience throughout the novel, Schoene echoes Brown's assertion that the role of children in the novel is to make "a sweet pure promise that indeed all shall be well".²⁹

Brown himself cannot be trusted here as an interpreter of his novel, however. This final chapter can be found in close to a dozen distinct drafts in Brown's papers, and only the last few contain any promise of hope. The first ten drafts are all presented as monologues by the old woman, defending her stories out of a fear that she'll be sent to an asylum: indeed, in these earlier drafts it seems more than likely that the preceding novel has only been a fantasy of an old Orkney woman unhappy with the life she lives. In one draft, the novel ends not with redemption, or even an acceptance that there is merit in storytelling, but with confusion:

'Why shouldn't I be a princess now and then? Once upon a time. Does it do any harm to anybody? An old thing at the door of death, she can imagine anything and she can say anything she likes so long as she is not hurting anybody. [...] Little princess, once you were womb-blind and one day you will be a cold coffin face. Princess, follow the dragon through the arrows and the wounds and the suits of armour. Make music on a broken flute. Give gold to poor people. What can be wrong in that? Tell me. We were all princesses. We gave gold and we were silent with sorrow. The dragon drank the blood of men and he roared and he belched out terrible fires from his mouth.'³⁰

The conflict presented in this ending is nearly overwhelming: fairy-tales are presented as a means of escape from the promise of death, but even they ultimately harbour a potential for destruction in the form of dragons. Although this more pessimistic ending was deleted by the final drafts, the tone remains clear throughout the past chapter, as the woman despairs of the value of storytelling. The child who appears at the very end speaks out of ignorance, and this brief note of positivity is not enough to change retroactively all that has come before. It is ultimately with this notion of stories as useless commodities in a time of war – and, as the novel has demonstrated, all of human

history is a time of war – that the novel ends. A mythic view, then, is not enough; the violence of the present intrudes on everything, and those who have “walked through hell”, by which Brown means those who have witnessed the events of modernity, “too hideous and horrible for words” (*TRC* 227), cannot emerge unscathed. Stories are a temporary comfort for children, but they are finally insufficient as either commentary or escape. The individual who has witnessed violence cannot be integrated into either a real or mythic community.

For Rowena and Brian Murray, this self-critical despair is the heart of the novel: “Brown risked destroying everything he had built up in his writing up to this point. [...] Remarkably, the narrative voice in this novel wearily rolls out each of these [tropes] and explicitly comments on their tedious familiarity.”³¹ Indeed, at least one reviewer of the novel believed that *Time in a Red Coat* “has made it clear that [Brown’s] preoccupation with Orkney is to some extent a metaphor”.³² While it is unlikely that Brown would countenance such a statement, the novel is certainly concerned with the difficulty of making metaphors or stories seem new and relevant. In pointing to a river as a figure for “the life of the whole tribe, the whole nation, the totality of the human race, and indeed of all creation itself”, Brown admits that he is employing “a worn metaphor” (*TRC* 31). Yet Brown traces out this metaphor for two pages, continually embellishing it, even while admitting that his work here is “tedious” (*TRC* 32). This passage, as shown below, is perhaps the key to the novel, for it is one of a very few places in his fiction where Brown comments on the nature of his writing in order to combat his image as a primitive storyteller in touch with the land. Here Brown is using an environmental metaphor to comment on the nature of life, a trope which appears regularly in his writings, but also to

demonstrate the ways in which neither the image itself nor its use in this particular novel are completely satisfactory. This is not the only instance of an authorial aside on the nature of life compared to something in the natural environment: later on, Brown writes that “Time is a dark wood, in which men and animals and worms live and have their being” (*TRC* 60), truth is a “perdurable seamless garment” (*TRC* 173), and so on. These foregrounded metaphors are especially worthy of attention because they were added late in the writing of the text, possibly as a solution to the difficulty of writing a pure fairy-tale. *Time in a Red Coat* was originally written as a straightforward play dealing with mythical scenes, and only transformed into a novel during the last few months of writing. The dramatic form of the story mirrors that of the novel; the scenes are laid out identically and contain the same action and much of the same dialogue. There are two primary changes between the work’s life as a play and as a novel: the introduction of a metafictional tone and the substitution of simple chapter titles for lengthy, descriptive scene headings. These headings are notable in themselves: they are a pastiche of nineteenth-century literature and represent more clearly than anything in the text the tone Brown is trying to establish in the play. The scene which becomes “The Taken Town” in the novel is known in the play as “She Comes to a Town without Townspeople, a Town All Broken Stone, a Town of Timbers Blackened and Smoking, a Town of Rats Below and Ravens Above”.³³ The replacement of such elongated and over-elaborate titles with simple, mythic images, followed by the exploration of these images in an impartial tone, suggests that Brown found the work as pure fairy-tale to be unsustainable late in his writing. The story needs to be estranged in order to make it new. In the final form of the

novel, Brown accomplishes this estrangement not through fantastical means, but through metafictional comment.

Brown continually calls attention to the inadequacy of the metaphors he employs, yet nevertheless foregrounds them strongly; the novel is continually interrupted by these authorial pronouncements on the nature of being. In his earlier story “The Day of the Ox”, Brown writes of a town which has “been at peace for a generation” and so lost its “life-relish”: without conflict, there are no new stories to be told.³⁴ Even though nothing in Brown’s writing suggests that he is writing from a world at peace, the very basis of *Time in a Red Coat* is that all its stories are ancient and perhaps no longer relevant to the way life is now lived. The way to make these stories newly relevant is by doing violence to them, not the physical violence that engenders storytelling in “The Day of the Ox”, but narrative violence. Brown thus admits that his metaphors, derived largely from fairy-tales, cannot capture the true nature of time, or life, or truth, but also argues that there is no other way to express these concepts. The only way to illustrate the necessity of metaphor and story when these concepts have become too familiar is to point out their failings. Read in this light, it is difficult not to see the novel as almost entirely self-critical. Brown draws on a notion of authorial awareness in the manner of a canonically postmodern writer like John Fowles. Both authors admit that their fiction is built on artifice and use that realisation to foreground the impossibility of any traditional narrative structure to tell the truth. Brown’s descriptions of rural landscapes, such as appear in virtually all of his work, come across here almost as parody:

Here, in such a landscape, is the very heart of peace and plenitude. Pastoral slopes, a shepherd boy under the tree with his pipe; the milking-girl crossing the field from the cows to churn and cheese-press, a wooden bucket of milk in each hand (white heavy brimming circles) and the beasts languid and herb-smelling

after the sweet burdens have been drawn from their udders; they lie about the field, white cows and dappled cows, gently shifting their jaws on the cud. (*TRC* 72)

This is a landscape that has never existed, except in Romantic paintings and fairy-tales. Given his earlier reservations about the inability of stories to tell the truth, Brown seemingly expects the reader to reject automatically such an overwrought description and instead read it as a decoy from the actual truth of a violent, meaningless life. Passages such as this (and there are many, scattered throughout the novel) are not intended to be read as accurate descriptions of a landscape, but as reminders that the novel itself (both universally and particularly) mythologizes what it narrates and that stories are, in the end, lies.

And yet it is still difficult to read this novel as completely nihilistic or completely opposed to the function of fiction. Even if fairy-tales and myths are insufficient and cannot shield either the reader or the characters from a terrible world, Brown still finds value in them. Early in the novel, Brown includes a long treatise on the value of this strange mythic storytelling and of his nameless, ageless heroine:

In a sense – in the poetical way of looking at things, which packs a whole world into a symbol, in order to make simple and joyous and comprehensible the manifold confusions of life – in a sense the young girl in the boat crossing the river is not only all the young women who have crossed the river in time past and who will cross it in time to come. [...] She is more, she is all women, all the girl children and the old ones who have added their salt drops to the sweet on-flowing river of life, and who hate war and women and war-makers with a bitter hatred. (*TRC* 33)

As in his earlier extended metaphor of the river, in which a river does not represent only an individual life but “all creation”, Brown is here stretching his metaphorical imagery as far as he can; it is not enough for the purposes of this novel to have a heroine who represents the confrontation of any given individual with a larger violent world, but she

must be “all women”. The most notable part of this passage, however, is not the wildly extended metaphor, but what Brown has to say about symbolism in general: it not only makes the world comprehensible, but “joyous”. Joy is an element not mentioned in many of Brown’s other discourses on the value of symbolism (the longest being in “The Killing” in *Magnus*, although it does receive a brief note in *Vinland*), but in *Time in a Red Coat* it is the entire secret mechanism of the novel. The entire surface of the novel points towards the invalidity of storytelling, the uselessness of fairy-tales, but whether in his discussion of symbols or his descriptions of overly precious rural landscapes, Brown seems to be making the argument that stories are still worthwhile because they overcome confusion with joy.

As a statement on the value of fiction, however, “joyous” is perhaps an insufficient framework on which to hang a novel, and Brown has more serious underlying intentions. Schoene argues that, since the novel’s “strangeness and obscurity make a reading along conventional lines problematic” – an easily accepted thesis – the novel must be read allegorically.³⁵ He here echoes some of the early reviews, such as that of David Profumo, who wrote that the novel “is filled with recurrent figures and shapes (spiritual symbols, elemental motifs) which remove the need for extensive historical realism”.³⁶ Profumo and Schoene argue that, in weighting his novel so much more towards the mythic than the historical, Brown must intend a mythic, rather than historical, reading. As will be shown below, for the purposes of this novel it is a false dichotomy; the difficulty with such an interpretation is that the novel, if looked at as myth or allegory, loses much of both its contemporary and historical relevance. In order to accentuate the allegorical elements of the novel, Schoene appears to accept fully Brown’s

authorial interludes as giving new life to the metaphors he employs, such as that of the metaphorical river discussed above: “This interweaving of the three distinctly separate entities of river, humanity and narrative culminates in a beautiful allegorical description of the dynamic complexities of communal identity in general”.³⁷ Schoene employs a somewhat reductionist argument here: given that it is impossible to read the novel as realist prose – the mode in which the majority of Brown’s fiction can be read – he turns to the pointers within the text itself and to Brown’s outward assurance that this work can be read as fairy-tale or allegory. (This recurrent combination and confusion of “myth”, “fairy-tale” and “allegory” is troubling in itself, both in the novel and in the criticism that follows. The novel certainly incorporates both mythic and fairy-tale elements, on which much of this mode of criticism rests, but it is difficult to argue that the inclusion of mythic elements makes the novel mythic in itself.) Whether in Profumo’s review, in which he argues that “sustaining the myth while staving off the fairy-tale is necessary for this type of rarefied fiction”,³⁸ or in Schoene’s study, where he calls *Time in a Red Coat* “an unusual text that has more in common with a fairy tale or mythic narrative than the traditional novel”,³⁹ the novel has been primarily read as a work of imaginative or even fantastical fiction, ignoring Brown’s claims within the text itself that this is an insufficient approach.

Given that the novel is “a very poetical book”, Schoene argues, it is fair to assume that “it is based on the allegorical poem with which it concludes”.⁴⁰ The poem itself appears in drafts as early as January 1979, and the whole of the novel is imbued with its language and themes. In this poem, the various repeated images of the novel are shown to be representative of the natural elements: the dragon, for instance, stands not only for

war but also for fire. If the novel were indeed to be drawn backwards from this poem, its thesis would appear to be that the balance between elements, between war and peace, modernity and pastoral life, is what makes the world whole - “In the garden four creatures / Dwelling together. / [...] Come fish, speak to the dragon. / Come fish, first, / The horse and the bird will follow” (*TRC* 248-9). The poem points towards an elemental unity; while the girl has been searching to destroy the dragon of violence throughout the novel, a retroactive application of this allegorical poem would imply that the girl’s struggle has been useless, for violence is a necessary aspect of the world. As made clear in the early draft of the final chapter cited above, the dragon wins, and violence not only cannot be eradicated, but is necessary for the construction of the narrative. Schoene, interestingly, is not willing to go this far in his reading of the novel as allegorical, and it is this hesitation that makes his argument difficult to accept; for one to read the novel as an allegory, it must be an allegory *of something*. He argues that “the function of the girl in the allegory [...] exceeds that of mere representation”,⁴¹ but it is unclear what the non-representational aspect of the girl’s function might be. This is an intentional ellipsis on Brown’s part: just as the reader is reminded that metaphors fail and are insufficient, so too Brown makes it impossible to read the novel as a straight allegory; it is too vague in its overall scope and too specific in its individual moments, too varied in its forms and too aware of its limitations for such a reading to be successful.

This ending poem – in a late draft, the poem was in fact kept as a separate epilogue – which is itself clearly allegorical, even if it does not retroactively make the entire novel into an allegory, is interestingly contrasted with Eavan Boland’s 1974 poem “The War Horse”, from which Brown appears to take much of his imagery in the novel.

The poem concerns individual refusal to engage in larger political concerns and the desire of the individual to stay safe within community and avoid the threat of violence. There is “nothing unusual” about the war horse, the “casual / Iron of his shoes as he stamps death / Like a mint on the innocent coinage of the earth”.⁴² The images here are markedly similar to *Time in a Red Coat*, where mint, coins and earth reappear in almost every chapter. The image of violence and destruction as “nothing unusual” is also repeated in the novel and is indeed perhaps the fundamental thesis of the novel, but Boland uses it far more pointedly, as a way to illustrate how people can look away from war:

But we, we are safe, our unformed fear
Of fierce commitment gone; why should we care

If a rose, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted
Like corpses, remote, crushed, mutilated?

[...] That rose he smashed frays
Ribbioned across our edge, recalling days

Of burned countryside, illicit braid:
A cause ruined before, a world betrayed.⁴³

In this relatively simple poem, Boland localises the destructive forces of violence in order to make them immediate to both the narrator and the reader and illustrate how they can be overlooked. If more despairing than Brown’s poem, in which the separated elements are invited to “come back, follow the song” to “the lost garden” (*TRC* 248), Boland’s poem is also much clearer in its imagery and in its sense of the continuance of destruction and the human need to look away. These themes, as well as the majority of images from “The War Horse”, are incorporated in Brown’s novel, but only form a small part of his larger project. Brown is using the greater scope of a novel not only to make an allegorical point about the nature of violence, but also to explore how it is that literature

is made to serve these points. His novel is to a great extent self-reflexive; it is finally a novel that explores the twin strains of myth and realism which have been present in all of Brown's previous writings and attempts to find a synthesis between the two modes. Brown is also using the form of a novel to make a statement about the ways in which time and narrative are portrayed in fiction, and how these elements are constructed. *Time in a Red Coat* is no less a meta-novel than the works of John Barth or Italo Calvino, despite its apparent simplicity and ideological focus. It is, for all of its internal confusion, one of Brown's most adamant statements on the value of story-telling.

Strangely, it is this very focus on story-telling within the novel that Douglas Gifford believes limits it. For Gifford, in works such as this Brown "becomes a great exploiter of the past, a traditional storyteller, at the same time as he disqualifies himself from being taken as a valid commentator on his own day. He *believes* in the superiority of the past."⁴⁴ It is this very reading of the novel, and of all of his works, which Brown is trying to undermine in his authorial intrusions. It is not only that this meta-fictional device "dismantle[s] the sense of narrative time",⁴⁵ as Profumo argues, but that they exist in order to disrupt the too-familiar notion of Brown as a traditional storyteller who merely taps into a pre-existing cache of quasi-mythic material. As Stephen Bann writes, in passages such as that concerning the metaphorical relevance of rivers, Brown "questions and undercuts his rhetorical effects" in order to "show us the contrasting process" between the poet and the storyteller.⁴⁶ For Bann, it is Brown the primitive story-teller who uses rivers as a metaphor for life and forests as one for time, and Brown the modern poet who reflects on the inability of such worn and hackneyed images to carry their full weight. Brown himself – or rather, the narrator – continually laments that his work is not

the equal of Dante or Tolstoy or Shakespeare, that he, who has “never seen a shot fired” (*TRC* 137), is unable to properly describe a battle or coin a new metaphor with the weight of the older ones he cites. Indeed, his work seems opposed to the more positive reviews which followed, in which Brown’s metaphorical river is claimed to be used “with a sureness born of its poetic truth and aptness, as effectively as Eliot or Frost”.⁴⁷ At the end of this long passage on the river of life, Brown writes, “It would be tedious to follow the river any further, though in the course of this tale – which is like a river too – we will have to go downstream a little” (*TRC* 32). Within this context, in a discussion of how the metaphor of a river was once true but is now outworn, Brown is directly criticising his own storytelling. “This tale” is like a river not only in the way it progresses from a small beginning to a potentially greater end, but in its very inability, like that metaphor, to strike the reader as new. In Bann’s parsing, it is the poet who reveals this, a revelation which does not reduce the novel to pure irrelevance but instead foregrounds the mechanisms behind its creation towards a greater end.

What this greater end might be is the primary difficulty of the novel, for as much as Brown foregrounds its construction, he is rarely willing to hint at its purpose, if that purpose is larger than a statement against the threat of nuclear war. However, the novel’s experimental edge and its teleological bent come into focus when the overall structure of each chapter is examined. Almost every chapter in the final version is titled vaguely: “River”, “The Inn”, “Forest”, “The Mountain Village” and so on. In each, Brown begins with a discussion of the metaphoric possibilities of such an object or location. In “The Inn”, for example, Brown writes that:

It is a worn metaphor, too, that sees life as an inn, a hostelry where we stay for a few nights, warming us at the fire with mulled wine, sitting at the broad table with

strangers that one will never see again – and yet Fate has drawn this assorted company together, for purposes that we delight to speculate on; or it was simply an accident, a fortuitous coming together, with little or no meaning: a grey congress. (*TRC* 42)

There are a number of notable aspects to this opening. Firstly, the style of writing in this passage, and in the novel as a whole, is markedly different from that of the bulk of Brown's fiction, which (with the exception of his earliest work) is filled with single-sentence paragraphs and a limited lexicon, pointing towards a simplicity of style which reflects the apparent simplicity of the lives being described. Here Brown's prose loops and flows, drawing on both the specific possibilities of the metaphor at hand (the "mulled wine") and yet accepting that the metaphor itself is partially unsuitable, pointing neither to Fate nor Chance and ultimately inconclusive. Seven types of humanity are to be viewed in this metaphoric inn, not because humanity is most easily divided into seven types, but because seven is "a number that is beautiful and mysterious in itself, and seems to be man's favourite among the ten ciphers" (*TRC* 42). Brown announces that this metaphor, both in its broad scope and its particularities, is ultimately arbitrary, no better or worse than any other comprehensive image of what life may be like. It is a way to speak about the nature of humanity, but it is no better or worse than any other way; the Inn is as good, and as bad, a comprehensive image as a Forest or a River or a Mountain Village.

The narrative voice thus alerts the reader to the arbitrary nature of the project; if Brown himself admits that the metaphor of the Inn is imperfect, the reader cannot comfortably accept it, despite the fact that Brown unravels the metaphor over two pages. Brown then makes a surprising shift, however, in the transition from "the inn-keeper" to "the present inn-keeper", who, while a minor character in the overall scheme of the

novel, is given a detailed personal history, a wife was a “constant joy and comfort” who is now dead, an old fear of a “locust-cloud” of an army. Brown then switches tone again to give a mystical view of the situation, in which, as in *Magnus*, the present is seen as an echo of the life of Christ: “in such a place as this had the new time begun, the Light and the Way and the Word” (*TRC* 48). This Christological passage begins as a part of the inn-keeper’s imaginings, but then reverts back to the narrative voice seen at the beginning of the chapter: “It did not occur to the old man, whose hands were blue with cold, what an equivocal part in the story that other inn-keeper had played” (*TRC* 48). The narrator takes this moment to retell the story of Christ’s birth, with a focus on the inn-keeper. In six pages, then, Brown takes the reader through three readings of a given situation: the inn is poetic metaphor; it is an actual (realistic) inn; it is an echo of the life of Christ. The remainder of the chapter, which is slightly more concerned with narrative movement than this first portion, places the heroine in the same range of possible interpretations: she is Mitzi, the inn-keeper’s dead wife; she is the snow princess of a child’s fairy-tale; she is a ghost; she is the bearer of news. In this chapter Brown continually balances the vague with the specific, the metaphorical with the realistic, all the while calling the reader’s attention to the unsuitability of any one of these readings.

In a recent article on Henry James’s difficulty in writing about modernity, Michael Wood claims that “James’s vagueness is in its way a tribute to the real, a sign he has not escaped into fable”.⁴⁸ This is a troubling assertion: it runs counter to the basic intuition that reality is anchored in specificity, and that the more particular a given text may be, the more successful it is in establishing itself as realistic. For both Wood and Brown, however, reality is itself far more fluid, anchored no less in vagueness than

specificity. Brown's purpose in a chapter such as this – and, to a certain extent, the novel is comprised of nothing but chapters such as this – is to make his own tribute to the real through the entire range of narrative and poetic possibilities. By combining these myriad perspectives, yet foregrounding their faults, Brown is trying to find a new way to tell a story, one that is not worn, not by inventing a wholly new style but by telling the same story again and again in many different ways, so that, perhaps, one of them, or the combination of all of them, will approach the truth. The girl in the red coat appears as all different things not out of a fault of perspective, or out of Brown's inability to reduce her to a single metaphor, but because she *is* all things: if the reader is to take Brown's statement that the girl is "all [...] who hate war" (*TRC* 33) seriously, then Brown must demonstrate the completeness of that "all", as he attempts to do throughout the novel. For Brown, then, the giant, vague metaphors of Inn and River are not insufficient because they are "worn" so much as because they are partial, because they only hint at a fullness and complexity that traditional narrative cannot encompass. In writing *Time in a Red Coat* as a mixture of fable and realism, myth and history, Brown is attempting to find a new way of story-telling which is not confined by traditional modes of interpretation.

This is certainly a brave, if fool-hardy, project. It is notable that Brown focuses his authorial interventions on metaphor for, from a Ricoeurian perspective, the "meaning-effects" of both metaphor and narrative "belong to the same basic phenomenon of semantic innovation".⁴⁹ For Paul Ricoeur – whose work Schoene innovatively applies in his interpretation of the novel – metaphor and narrative both "invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience".⁵⁰ That is, both metaphor and narrative (or plot) make, by means of

language, the virtually intangible experience of time more tangible. For Ricoeur, as Sanford Schwartz points out, metaphor and narrative both exist not on the level of the word, but the sentence; both narrative and metaphor have “the referential function of redescribing reality by proposing connections that call into question the existing order of our semantic fields”.⁵¹ This calls into play the relationship between the specific and the vague described above; as in that instance, metaphor does not take the reader out of reality (in this case, into fable), but rather redescribes reality, or better reorients the reader in relation to reality, in order to convey a new perspective on past events. Metaphor and narrative are ways of redescribing time, a phenomenon which cannot, for Ricoeur, be described simply or accurately without the palimpsest of textual innovation. The purpose of this layering is to circumvent the Heideggerian suspicion, discussed above, that art is no longer a direct bearer of truth. As Ricoeur argues, if “metaphor is that strategy of discourse by which language divests itself of its function of direct description in order to reach the mythic level where its function of discovery is free [...] we can presume to speak of metaphorical truth in order to designate the ‘realistic’ intention that belongs to the redescriptive power of poetic language”.⁵² Metaphor is thus a way to approach more closely that which is real by combining it with the mythic.

Whether through metaphor or narrative, this structuring is centred around a central truth claim which, for Ricoeur, reflects the “temporal character of human experience”.⁵³ Ricoeur is thus fundamentally interested in the second of Heidegger’s two senses of history, that which is concerned not with the objectified past but with lived experience, specifically lived experience as understood through time. Time itself and, following it, human temporal experience, is for Ricoeur a necessarily inconclusive

experience/phenomenon which only narrative has the power to explain or make tangible. Narrative achieves this in part through artifice. Just as Heidegger and Lukács argued towards a notion of ahistorical history, Ricoeur finds that chronology is directly opposed to temporality and that it is “necessary to confess what is other than time in order to be in a position to give full justice to human temporality”.⁵⁴ This initially appears to be a privileging of a mythic/metaphorical perspective on human experience which in some way surmounts that which is “real” or true. For Ricoeur, however, this “confession” deepens the human experience of time: time becomes human – which is to say perceptible and tangible – through its encapsulation in narrative. Similarly, “narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence”.⁵⁵ This symbiotic relationship is required because without narrative (or more specifically, what Ricoeur terms “emplotment”, the understanding of time and history through narrative) the human experience of time is paradoxical. Metaphor and narrative are thus seen as organising principles for the experience of time, without which time itself cannot be fully experienced.

Ricoeur’s argument in the first volume of *Time and Narrative* is largely concerned with the writing of history, rather than fiction. White builds upon these ideas in order to argue that “history and literature speak indirectly about the aporetic experiences of temporality by means of and through signifiers that belong to different orders of being, real events on the one side, imaginary events on the other”.⁵⁶ For White, the idea of narrative is basic to both history, as the study of the real, and myth or fiction, as the study of the imaginary: it is only recently that “storytelling [... has] come under the injunction to keep the two orders unmixed in discourse”.⁵⁷ White goes on to argue that

narrative history has become a dominant, if discredited, mode of relating the real because historians desire to show that 'real' events have the fullness and coherence of imaginary ones. There is no access to the past except through the imaginative or narrational process: any history which claims to represent the 'real' directly is misguided. Narrative is thus suspect but still integral to an understanding of history. As he writes: "How else [other than through narrative] can any past [...] be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an 'imaginary' way?"⁵⁸

Even as White and Ricoeur problematise the relation between history and narrative, they still elide the role of the storyteller or narrator, the constructor of the explanatory narrative. As David Carr argues, narrative of any sort requires a storyteller, a narrator who knows what is upcoming and who is capable of organising the temporal sequences of experience into a plot. Narrative is not only constitutive of history, but of "social time"; a community, for instance, can only be known through recognition of its own narrative. For Carr, this storyteller achieves full potential in his interaction with both audience and protagonist: this combination is, for Carr, constitutive of community.⁵⁹ Carr removes much of the force of White and Ricoeur's arguments in his apparent assumption that narrative, history and community can all be approached as undivided, nonsuspect wholes. As has been repeatedly shown above, from Hegel on, history and art cannot be approached unproblematically, but must always be read against and through each other. However, Carr's focus on the role of the storyteller in the framework of narrative creation offers significant insights into Brown's project. A combination of Ricoeur, White and Carr's views on narrative history has enormous explanatory power for a project such as *Time in a Red Coat*.

Brown foregrounds the authorial structuring of events through his mixture of narrative and metaphor. In a chapter such as “The Inn” Brown highlights the limitless ways in which a story could be told, or in which the events could be made a story. The girl herself can also be seen as a story-telling figure, insofar as her journey organises the narratives of the lives of the people whom she encounters. Just as in Carr’s paradigm a story-teller is set off from the community, the girl is individualised by the authorial influence she exerts on the people around her. As in Carr’s reading of narrative social history, a community is formed by the commonality of being *in* the story; the function of a storyteller is to make communal everything that is not the storyteller. The conflation of myth and history through narrative thus allows a mythic view of a whole and unified community. Brown introduces a layer of self-reflexivity here in order to heighten the reader’s conception of this outside structuring. Brown’s metaphorical intrusions – both his comments on the nature of the metaphor and the metaphors themselves – cannot be seen as an anti-realist cloaking or a way for Brown to shape history unconsciously for his own convenience, as many critics have read them. Instead, somewhat like Ricoeur, he is using metaphor as a way of approaching reality more closely and “redescribing” events in order to bring them closer to some notion of truth in order to create a common identity for those things he is describing. For Brown, the shaping of history is what makes it real or true and is what makes tangible the human experience of temporality. Far from using myth and metaphor as an escape from history and time, Brown is using these literary tropes to approach a discordant reality more fully and perhaps more honestly. Brown’s foregrounding of his own interference is completely necessary for this project to succeed; if he were to use the metaphor of the river unchecked, the reader would be lulled into

thinking this merely an historical novel with extravagant mythical and metaphorical elements, or an equally extravagant myth based in history. Instead, Brown introduces himself as a shaper and narrator who is forced to rely on outworn metaphors. He does so in order to stress that these myths and metaphors are but an approach to reality and that history, as read in a novel such as this, is every bit as constructed as the more obvious metaphors. For Brown, no single myth or metaphor or fairytale or historical account is capable of conveying the truth; it is in their combination and interaction that some sort of truth begins to emerge.

Brown most fully conveys this notion in the truly odd chapter “The Magus”, in which a secondary author, of a sort, is introduced. The author in this case is a servant known as Erasmus (probably *the* Erasmus, although this is never clarified) who serves a wealthy modern lord (the Magus of the title). The Magus is a man who finds solace in literature, specifically in Blake, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Dryden, Aristophanes, Shakespeare and Homer, as well as from the dual threats of his daughter’s death and the end of the world. The Magus, who is almost as ageless, or as old, as the girl (and who, like the girl, is on the verge of death), is the defender of war, its archivist and chronicler, and keeps a museum of war that goes far into the future as well as the past. Although this chapter is the most grounded in a specific time (the 1870s) of any in the novel, its primary characters all live outside of time, watching the ways in which the world turns towards war. The Magus is clearly set up as the heroine’s counterpart: he is a man who aestheticises violence, even as he abhors it. The horrors of nuclear war, for instance, ““are matters that our children and children’s children will have to endure, come what may – and who are you, or I, that we should shrink from the terror and the beauty?””

(TRC 187). The Magus is both a believer in poetry and a doubter of myth. He believes the girl to be mad, “judging from her letter, with her talk of being fifteen centuries old, and of her mission to reconcile dragon with bird and fish and horse”, yet, in showing her the museum, he sets out to determine if she “proves to be a Cordelia or a crazy Cassandra” (TRC 194-5). The Magus reduces the girl’s story itself to the tropes of literature: “I think it may be that you see yourself as a symbol for all the world’s women”, he says, and goes on to congratulate the girl on her apt choice of symbol and metaphor (TRC 207). The Magus here stands in for the reader, both in knowledge of the wars of the twentieth century and in a desire to compare the plight of the heroine of *Time in a Red Coat* to other fictional characters and to see this story as part of a poetic continuum. His Whiggish friends, however, see the Magus as “a hindrance to the resistless course of history, whose end is some Elysium or Tir-Nan-Og or Eden” (TRC 213). He is a man who (accurately, as the reader is continually reminded) forecasts doom. The Magus is thus what could be termed a rational thinker, a man who has an appreciation for poetry and the workings of myth, and yet sees them as being wholly irrelevant to “real” history or to the workings of violence and technology. The Magus is a sceptic, then, not only of the girl but of the novel in which he plays a part, a man who believes that myth and history can only dimly and irrelevantly interrelate.

The perspective of the Magus is thus layered on top of the girl’s story, offering a rational respite from Brown’s myth-making. The Magus himself, however, is only an intermediate layer, for the reader is told his story through the eyes of Erasmus, an even more sceptical and disinterested narrator. Erasmus is “weary” of the war museum, “though I know that such things must be, and that I may even live [...] to suffer them in

my own flesh and spirit” (*TRC* 213). “The Magus and his symbols endure” (*TRC* 214), writes Erasmus, but as a narrator he remains disinterested, for the symbols do not ultimately intrude on his conception of real life. For Erasmus, war is too real to be symbolised or to be limited in representation to poetry or myth; he is willing to base his work upon that of Aldous Huxley, “not yet born” (*TRC* 225), but cannot see anything miraculous in this museum set outside of the time, an amassing of the artefacts of past and future. Erasmus is unwilling to accept the idea, contained within the museum, of history as narrative, but is instead only interested in the ways in which it will effect individual lives. Brown thus sets up a three-fold perspective on history: there is Erasmus, who sees history as a series of unconnected events; the Magus, who looks to poetry and symbols as a respite from the demands of history; and the heroine, who looks at history as being in no way separate from myth. The heroine is only able to achieve this perspective because she herself is kept separate from history: she is an observer, rather than an active participant. In the play-script version of this theme – titled alternately “She Watches: The Pageant Goes Past Her, Scene after Scene” and “She Lingers, The Loom of War Gathers Her In, Scene by Shuttle by Scene” – the girl is kept at a physical remove from the events described: “The girl at the side of the stage. She is compelled to witness scenes of war from later times. Immense shadows, they flicker as on a cinema screen.”⁶⁰ The girl’s perspective thus mirrors that of the reader: rather than being involved in the events of history, she only perceives them through an art-like medium. In this contrasting series of perspectives, Brown calls attention to his narrative project in the same way that he foregrounds his use of familiar metaphors in earlier chapters: he is

pointing to the inability of the novel to offer a definite answer to the questions raised by history and violence.

His introduction of the Magus and Erasmus allows Brown to state most clearly his case against nuclear war (it is not accidental that the final exhibit in the museum is a lump of uranium ore, the use of which, presumably, ends history⁶¹); it also comes close to undermining Brown's entire project, for it can be seen as the introduction of a certain relativism in which myth and symbol can be used as much, or as little, as the reader desires. And yet, as shown repeatedly above, the novel as a whole works towards the opposite perspective: in *Time in a Red Coat* Brown demonstrates the continued relevance of myth and symbol in the study of history and their usefulness even for a modern, rational mind. The questions Brown asks in this chapter are much the same as those Tolstoy raises at the end of *War and Peace* (a constant referent throughout the novel), in which the movement of history is compared to that of a train:

A locomotive is moving. Someone asks: 'What makes it move?' The peasant answers, 'Tis the devil moves it.' Another man says the locomotive moves because its wheels are going round. A third maintains that the cause of the motion lies in the smoke being carried away by the wind.⁶²

For Tolstoy, the movement of both the train and history can only be explained by the forces of power. His three-part interpretation quoted here illustrates the inability of any given man, without a broader perspective, to fully understand the movement of history. In his own three-part perspective in "The Magus" Brown is offering the wealth of varied interpretation without the final solution which Tolstoy gives. For Brown, the modern author cannot, like Tolstoy, ascribe cause and effect, but can only watch the events of history and offer possible interpretations. This is why the end of "The Magus" is both frustrating and necessary. In it, the reader is invited to "imagine three people standing in

a group at the door of the ultimate gallery” (*TRC* 226), the gallery, it is assumed, in which the future and the end of humanity are revealed. The Magus is terrified, for he has seen this room before, and Erasmus is disinterested, but the girl enters and locks the door (and will emerge, finally, unknown to the other two, in modern-day Orkney). Erasmus listens at the door:

What I heard after – it may be – an hour, after a bird and flower and bee pause, was the sound of the laughter of many children. [...] And then I found I had fallen into a drowse, on my knees, stooped there outside the door, and the thread of a pleasant pastoral dream had passed through me. (*TRC* 228)

Both in style and sense, this passage is distinct from anything Erasmus has written before, and the reader is left not knowing if the future is indeed utopian or if the idea of utopia itself is only a shielding dream. Throughout the passage, both the Magus and the reader have mocked those secondary characters who argue that progress will lead to peace and that the future holds an end to violence; here, in “the laughter of many children”, that is exactly what the future seems to contain. Thus as much as Brown forecasts a nuclear destruction and as much as he stresses the intrinsic nature of violence, there is still hope for peace within the novel, even if it is only in a dream. For Brown, the individual cannot know, cannot truly perceive the forces of history, but can only hint at them, through narrative and myth find some close approximation of the truth.

This ultimate ambiguity concerning history, and even the value of art in the interpretation of that history, is something towards which Brown was working in the stories published shortly before *Time in a Red Coat*. Schoene highlights two stories from *Andrina and Other Stories* which are closely related to the events of *Time in a Red Coat*: “Kings and Shepherds” and “Magi”. In the first, the great-grandfather of Genghis Kahn, here called “the desert king”, is halted in his destruction by a shepherd who

reminds the king of his own joy in pastoral life. For Schoene, the moral of the story is “that if people concentrated more on their pristine bond with nature and remembered their true identities as shepherds or [...] as fisherman, there would be few soldiers left”.⁶³ This simple allegorical interpretation is born out by the penultimate passage, in which the desert king tells his army to turn back because, “If we venture too far we will cut off and be destroyed. We will not see our hills or sheep again.”⁶⁴ There are two crucial elements on which Schoene does not comment, however, which prove the story to be far more complicated and subtle than this interpretation suggests. Firstly, Brown points to the delight the soldiers take in war:

Spectacular things – like dismemberments, impalings, decapitations, the burning of cities – that was what delighted the tent-dwellers and hillmen of the east. That was why they followed their king, who had once been a poor man like themselves: those amazing carnivals of destruction [...] and the sheer joy of storming into the dangerous unknown.⁶⁵

As in *Time in a Red Coat*, Brown is here making the point that, although there are those, such as the girl in the novel or the shepherd in this story, who deplore violence, there are also those who enjoy it, and that violence or war cannot be willed away. Even if these soldiers were to concentrate on their bond with nature, it is unlikely that all of them would prefer the simple life which Brown is advocating, and in his stories of the glories of war and the excitement of violence and destruction, Brown is accepting that violence is a necessary counterpart to the pastoral. The second crucial element follows from this, a simple coda: “About a century later the great-grandson of the desert king led his hosts into the west. His name was Genghis Kahn, and he rode further than his simple ancestor.”⁶⁶ Stylistically this passage is far different from the grandeur of the rest of the story, the quasi-mythic “armies of the desert king”. In this almost cinematic revelation,

Brown changes the reader's interpretation of the story entirely: what has just been read is not myth or allegory, but a prelude to real historical events. Brown is thus forcing the reader to go back over the story and read it, or reimagine it, not as myth but as history, with all of the cultural preconceptions and received knowledge about the life of Kahn. Without this coda, the story invites the reading Schoene gives it, a reading which highlights its mythic or allegorical elements, and thus keeps it at a remove. With the introduction of familiar historical personages and events at the end, Brown is insisting that neither straight history nor straight myth provide an adequate understanding of the world: instead, narratives must be read simultaneously as myth and history in order to be more completely understood.

Brown's work in both "King and Shepherd" and *Time in a Red Coat* focuses primarily on non-Western cultures, perhaps as a way of making the material appear more distant from contemporary life and more limned between myth and history. Regardless of the political inferences which could be drawn from this move, it is a device which Brown also uses in stories such as "Magi", in which heralds of destruction are seen in Asian, Africa and Inuit cultures. "Magi" is too far given to pure pronouncements of the nature of violence and history to be fully successful as a story – "The same old blood-stained tear-stained page is read, over and over and over, and re-enacted. Some day the finger of history may turn the page. On the next page, it may be, there will be a beautiful thing written."⁶⁷ – but Brown is here again asserting both the cyclical nature of history and the impossibility of understanding it fully either as myth or pure reality, but only as a force shaped by narrative. Oddly, in a description of a culture in which writing is done on sheets of silk, as seen at the beginning of the story, Brown uses an anachronistic and

acultural metaphor, that of a book, to describe history. History is wrapped up in written narrative, and, for Brown, cannot be understood outside those narrative forces. This becomes more clear in a third story from the same volume, “The Chamber of Poetry”. The story is built on a rather contrived conceit: an inn, like the inn in *Time in a Red Coat* both mythic and particular, in which dozens of poets, ranging from Li Po to Hugh MacDiarmid, rest and work. The story is most easily seen as a convenient way for Brown to list his influences – rather cheekily, one of the poets featured in the story is Terence, the central figure of *A Shropshire Lad*. Brown is here further mixing the fabular with the authentic; but it is also a statement on the way in which literature affects the perception of time and history. Although the innkeeper burns the leftover poems he follows, and leaves the room with a dusty bottle and broken quill, the litany of poets at the end indicates, as Douglas Dunn argues, “a belief in poets and poetry which many readers will find unreal or sentimental”.⁶⁸ Surely Brown’s depiction of Wordsworth weeping at the sight of a daisy strikes almost any reader as far too sentimental and contrived. Yet this is Brown’s very point: the lives of the poets and their actual histories are unconvincing to us; it is instead the narratives they have constructed, the written work, which endures and which shapes their world for later readers. It is literature that defines history for the reader.

Brown’s focus on the uses of history and the ways in which history is revealed through literature are crucial because they inform all of his work, although rarely as explicitly as in *Time in a Red Coat* and *Vinland*. If Brown, as examined at greater length elsewhere, is primarily a writer of community, then Nancy’s claim that “community itself is something historical” must be taken into account.⁶⁹ There are two ways to read this

statement. The first is the sense found throughout Brown's work that community is predicated on its own history: in his autobiography, for instance, he repeatedly turns to the *Orkneyinga Saga* for its explanatory power. Tradition, literature and historico-geographical rootedness comprise a community in this first understanding. But community is also history as happening. Nancy draws on both Ricoeur and Heidegger in this argument: for the latter, "history has its essential importance neither in what is past nor in the 'today' and its 'connection' with what is past, but in that authentic historicising of existence which arises from Dasein's future".⁷⁰ For Nancy:

history is community, that is, the happening of a certain space of time – as a certain spacing of time, which is the spacing of a "we." This spacing gives space to community and spaces it, which means that it exposes it to it(self). And this is the explanation for this very simple and obvious fact: for why history was never thought as the compilation of individual stories but always as the proper and singular mode of common existence, which is itself the proper mode of existence.⁷¹

History then is important not because of its factual relation to the past, nor for its ability to illuminate the present, but because history is the way in which communities exist. History is the way in which people live in common. This is thoroughly illustrated in *Time in a Red Coat*, in which the girl who is freed from history is also freed from community: without history, there is only the individual. Thus, while a novel such as *Time in a Red Coat* initially seems as distant as possible from *Greenvow* or the early stories, the themes addressed are identical, only addressed from opposite directions. In all of his work, Brown is attempting to explain how it is that people co-exist. In these two later novels, he looks to history as a way of explaining what Nancy calls the spacing of community, or the way in which a community is revealed to itself, as itself and for itself. Without history, there is no self-understanding.

B. Myth and History in *Vinland*

Brown returned to his exploration of the nature of history in his later novel *Vinland*. Unlike *Time in a Red Coat*, *Vinland* is not constructed around an argument on the uses of narrative, but is instead, according to Brown, intended to be read as “a boys’ story”,⁷² a simple, conventional historical adventure.⁷³ Yet the traces of narrative emplotment and of the interaction of myth and history continue. *Vinland* initially strikes the reader as the most linear of Brown’s novels and the work which seems least like a collection of short stories. Like *Beside the Ocean of Time*, it is centred on the life of one man, Ranald Sigmundson, from early boyhood until death, but unlike that novel, *Vinland* moves straightforwardly through time, chronicling Ranald’s adventures in a linear progression. It is thus tempting to see *Vinland* as Brown’s least experimental novel, no more, really, than an adventure story. Yet the novel quickly begins to strike the reader as strange: Ranald’s life not only encompasses the change from Viking to Christian culture in the Orkneys, but seemingly every important event in the medieval north, from Leif Ericson’s discovery of America to the events described in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. As shown in the previous chapter, the events in *Vinland* prefigure not only Magnus the saint, but *Magnus* the novel. (Indeed, Jonathan Coe has argued that the symbolic use of *Vinland* is “a natural equivalent of the ‘seamless coat’ after which St Magnus was searching in the earlier novel”.⁷⁴) Although it is not impossible to interpret the novel as a sequence of exciting adventures, Brown is also experimenting with the ways in which literature conveys the perception of time and event.

As Julian D'Arcy points out, it is surprising, in reflection on the novel, that the sequence detailing the settlement of America only occupies eleven pages.⁷⁵ Just as *Time in a Red Coat* can be seen as an argument against nuclear armament, largely through the chapter "The Magus", the "Vinland" chapter of the later novel forms one of Brown's most direct arguments for the value of environmental preservation. This argument is made, in a way which echoes Lukács's reading of Scott, by allowing characters to express themselves in wholly anachronistic ways. Leif Ericson points towards the Indians' ("skraelings") ecologically sound lifestyle, and forecasts that coming generations will fail to continue such a lifestyle:

'But I think it will come to this in the end', said Leif later, 'that men will devise weapons to kill even the greatest whale. The skraelings, that we thought so savage and ignorant, were wiser than us in this respect. [...] Did you not see what reverence the Vinlanders had for the animals and the trees and for all living things? It seemed to me that the Vinlanders had entered into a kind of sacred bond with all the creatures, and there was a fruitful exchange between them, both in matters of life and death.' (V 24)

This is clearly not a statement which could have been made by the real Leif Ericson, but instead relies on the reader's knowledge of contemporary events, and the reader's sympathies towards a certain environmental politics. Ericson's speech here is predicated on the literature of environmental apocalypse which came into being, following the work of Rachel Carson, largely in the 1970s and 80s, as well as what Greg Garrard terms the "biocentric inhumanism" of novelists such as D.H. Lawrence.⁷⁶ Brown is here foregrounding a necessary irony in this sort of historical fiction, in which the truth value of Ericson's words is necessarily unknown to the speaker but is known to the reader and can be applied by the reader to contemporary life. This anachronism could be said to take the reader out of the novel, because it requires an ability to look at the historical

events described therein both as set in the past and interpretable by the present, but it also stresses the symbolic nature of this first episode, in which Vinland is seen not as, necessarily, a real place (for throughout the remainder of the novel, many of the people Ranald encounters do not entirely believe his stories) but as a symbol. For D'Arcy, Vinland is symbol of "promise" and "possibility", as well as of "Ranald's aspirations and the duality of man's nature".⁷⁷ It is also, in the light of the experiments Brown worked into *Time in a Red Coat*, a symbol of history itself, a history that remains isolated and untouched and which does not need the layering of fiction to bear truth.

Brown begins to accomplish the second symbolic layering of Vinland through the presence of a bard (Ard, the rhyme making the name an unmistakable pun) as the Vikings leave Vinland, so that the reader's final glimpse of these events comes through a secondary filter of literature. The poem composed for the Norsemen as they leave is one of mourning, both for Bjorn, a man killed by the natives ("Now, Bjorn, may the savages / Keep your bright hair") and for a primitive way of life which he represents ("Your heart, your hands strong / For tree-hewing, oar-hauling / Sowing barley in broken sillions") (V 22). Bjorn is here being used to represent a pastoral form of life, a lifestyle which informs almost all of Brown's works. With his death, however, coupled with Ericson's speech discussed above, Brown is indicating that the life of the Vikings is necessarily doomed as much as the life of the Indians. Ard's poem functions as an elegy for a lifestyle the fate of which Brown will continue to explore for the remainder of the novel. Although Brown does not appear in the novel as a foregrounded narrator, as he does in *Time in a Red Coat*, or even through the authorial introductions of philosophy and anthropology in *Magnus*, there is nevertheless a trace here of what Bakhtin would call a

“polyphonic novel”, a novel in which “the dialogical relation between the characters is, in effect, developed to the point of including the relation between the narrator and his/her characters.”⁷⁸ Brown, in his depiction of two vanishing cultures, engages with the reader (and possibly the characters) through issues about which the characters know nothing; he is writing from a necessarily foreign and ahistorical perspective in order to make the symbolic world of Vinland as present to the reader as the more literal configuration of that world. As Ricoeur argues: “Only the confrontation between the world of the text and the life-world of the reader will make the problematic of narrative configuration tip over into that of the refiguration of time by narrative”.⁷⁹ That is, Brown is willing to show the difficulties of the layering of history within the text by engaging the reader with that which is not in the text, with a knowledge of historical events that follow on from what is presented here. There is no way for the reader to approach this novel without a knowledge of the death of agrarian societies and of the claims made upon the Americas by European society. In passages such as Ard’s poem and Ericson’s speech, Brown is forcing the reader to engage with her knowledge of events outside the sphere of the novel in order to understand more fully the way in which time and history, as well as myth, are presented within the novel.

In the above-quoted passage, Ricoeur is drawing on Lukács, transferring his theories about the ways in which the novel portrays the interaction between individual and society to the ways in which the individual interacts with time. For Lukács, given the impossibility of any novel actually approaching a total representation of the world, objective representation becomes impossible: “if this world is to evoke a totality [...] then some form of artistic concentration is again necessary and any straightforward

copying of reality must be resolutely abandoned”.⁸⁰ For Ricoeur, this impossibility extends to time as well; time within the novel cannot be a mirror of time outside the novel, the “time of narration” and “narrated time” are not the same, but exist in a complex relation.⁸¹ While Brown does not reflect on these questions within the course of the novel, as he does in *Time in a Red Coat*, he nevertheless proposes a solution, a bridge between the time presented in the novel and the necessity of accepting an outside time in which both Brown and the readers exist. Brown’s bridge is, not surprisingly, myth, specifically the power of myth to make the particular vague and, in so doing, to make it more closely related to the truth. This is undoubtedly an initially contradictory impulse: most readers (and writers) might assume that the work of an historical novel is to invest the broad scope of past time with insight into particular moments and individuals. For Brown, though, the very opposite is true: just as the individual is most fully revealed through the community in which he dwells, history is most truthfully told when it merges with myth. And yet this solution raises more problems than it answers, for Brown rarely wrote pure mythology or fairy-tale.⁸² Here, however, he is more interested in the way that literature interprets past events and in the layering of myth and actuality which constitutes art. As in *Time in a Red Coat*, Brown’s interest in *Vinland* is not so much on historical events but on modern conceptualisations of those events, including the ones formed through the reading of this novel. *Vinland* is, in parts, a meditation on the responsibility of an author to historical fact and to greater, if more vague, truths.

This somewhat meta-fictional focus is most clearly showcased at the start of the chapter “Breckness”. The preceding chapter, “Ireland”, is a brief depiction of a battle fought between Sigtrygg, the King of Dublin and ultimately victorious Brian Boru, the

King of Ireland. Even in this setting, Ranald looks back to Vinland not as a lived experience, but as an informing myth. He reflects that:

The skraelings in Vinland had seemed, of all men, to be a part of that most intricate delicate web that 'the great spirit' had made, in the beginning, for the delight of all his creatures.

'And yet,' thought Ranald, 'it is possible to be made one with nature now, in the time of youth, on an Irish hillside, with battle horns blorting around, and the clash of swords and the shouts of victory and the groans of dying men...' Again it came to him, the image of the plough and the cornstalk at Breckness in Orkney, and a girl sewing a patch on a homespun coat. (*V* 96)

Vinland is relevant to Ranald's life, then, not as a moment in his past, but as a representation of an ideal life which he hopes to replicate in another place, at another time. Here the reader can see how the concept of history has shifted in Ranald's imagination from lived experience to the objectified, or aestheticised (in the form of a self-consciously mythologized) past. The actual relation of the Indians with nature is less important than their idealised relation, and the moment of Ranald's encounter with another race is less lasting than the conceptualisations of them he brings forth from it. Memory here trumps reality; myth trumps the actual. As Brown takes pains to demonstrate, however, the relation between history and history-based myth works simultaneously in two directions. Ranald's experience in Vinland has become a present myth, an ideological stance based on, but also removed from, his actual lived experience. The idealised, quasi-mythic Vinland, however, has the ability to affect the character's future, as Ranald looks to incorporate not the actual elements of Vinland into his life in the Orkneys, but those elements more closely related to his mythic interpretation of the past. This myth even influences Ranald's perspective on the events surrounding him at the given moment, a battle in Ireland, improbable as that may be. For Brown (through Ranald), the past becomes instantly transformed into myth in order that it may offer a

mythic gloss on the present, an ability for the individual to distance himself from surrounding events and reflect on them through an almost novelistic, authorial stance.

A few years later, back in the Orkneys, Ranald hears a poet's rendition of the Irish battle in which he fought. The poet himself is a spectral figure, unfixed to any particular location: "'I don't belong anywhere,' he said. 'I go here and there, and I'm not beholden to anyone for food or drink or shelter. The poem is everything'" (V 113-4). The poet is thus fully objective insofar as he speaks not out of experience but out of the needs of art, but he is also fully subjective, in that his art pays his way through society. Although he speaks of being merely a bearer of the truth that is encapsulated in the poem, he also relies upon his storytelling abilities for his livelihood. For Brown, the poet has an especial ability to abstract the concrete, to give meaning to events outside of the way they have impacted upon individual lives. Even Ranald, whose life story is centred on the abstraction and mythologization of his own past, cannot speak the abstracted truth about the event. When he offers to evaluate the validity of the poem, the nameless poet says:

'I know that you were at Contarf. [...] But for all you knew about it, about the true essential meaning of the event, you might as well have been at the horsefair in Dounby. You are as ignorant of the meaning of war as old Sverr the smith who stayed at home beside the forge and anvil. [...] What concerns me [...] is not only this battle in Ireland that was fought between the river and the headland. It is about every battle that was ever fought or that ever will be fought. It has nothing to do with glory or heroism, my poem. It is a very black ballad.' (V 114)

Here the poet unites the authorial perspective of *Time in a Red Coat* and *Vinland*; the perspective of the outsider and the will to abstraction are more closely aligned with the truth than individual experience can be. Rather than seeing a given event as such, such a battle is seen as part of a larger scheme, each battle is any or every battle. For Brown, truth is not entrusted to pure historical recountings, but to their layered versions that

come through literature. The poem the poet recites is far different from that of Ard, quoted above. It is not only less heroic, less elegiac, less concerned with the particularities of the moment on which it reflects, but it also blends a visceral vision of warfare (“The guts hot with gore, / Slimed with death-silver.”) with a more mythic, even religious, view (“I saw the death-sisters, / War-maidens, at their weaving / Of the war-web”) (*V* 115, 114). The language Brown uses here, with its heavy reliance on compounds and alliteration, is in keeping with poetry of the period, but the effect is far more contemporary; not only is the poet an outsider to the events described, but he is also outside the time and culture of the novel’s setting, standing in, as it seems, for Brown himself. Brown in this passage highlights both a given poet in a given hall and also his own project in writing an historical novel which sidesteps the majority of that tradition. In the voice of the poet, Brown is advancing an argument that it is only from the outside and only through a limn of reflection which incorporates fact and myth equally that the truth can be approached. The task of this unnamed poet is that of Brown himself: to reinterpret the past in such a way that it is relevant to the present, both in its particularity and its abstracted symbols.

Continuing this theme of a truth which is mediated through art rather than being based on personal experience, Brown makes the Edenic symbolism of Vinland most explicit through the same nameless poet. Although this conceptualisation of Vinland as “an earthly emanation of some divine harmony”⁸³ has been building since the beginning of the novel, it is only through the poet that the mythic significance of this image is fully realised, as the poet sings at length “of that land in the western ocean where is no winter or sickness, no hunger or withering, no battle or black whispers” (*V* 116). The poet is

singing explicitly of Tir-nan-og, but yet, in the imagination of Ranald (and perhaps the reader), this vision takes shape as an idealised version of Vinland, another western land, already somewhat mythic, in which:

There is no work to be done, for the orchard trees are heavy with fruit always and the fields – innocent of plough or harrows or scarecrow – are forever ripe towards harvest. And then the immortal young in that blessed place move along together in small groups, wisdom and beauty come from their lips, a courteous and most live exchange of utterance, so that their language is nearer to song than speech. (*V* 116)

If one takes into account the early-twentieth-century theory that “Vinland” was derived from Ireland,⁸⁴ the interflux between Vinland and Celtic myth becomes inescapable. The point for Brown is not that Vinland itself was an Edenic place, despoiled by Viking invasion, but that its true significance lies in its symbolic use rather than in its reality. Vinland as a myth or symbol shapes the rest of Ranald’s life, because the myth is stronger than lived experience. For Brown abstraction and the myth unconceal the truth even as in their layerings they initially appear to conceal it. In making historical events something more than what they actually were they reveal their inner nature.

The use of mythic images, especially those of the loom and the garden which reappear in so much of Brown’s work, symbolising unity with God and unity with the land respectively, is most forcefully stated towards the end of the novel in a long speech by Peter the abbot on the novel’s stated themes of fate and free will. The abbot speaks of a symbolic garden through which all humanity passes, and in which they are “possessed with a joy that [they] cannot explain or comprehend [...] the whole of a man’s life is pervaded by sweetnesses that have no physical or mental source, they touch his mind and heart and spirit even in places of stone and thorn” (*V* 186). This notion, which owes a great deal to the Heidegger’s concept of *Ereignis*, serves to make what once was tangible

in Ranald's life wholly into something ethereal. From this avowedly Christian perspective, the actual Vinland towards which Ranald has been struggling to return is quite literally immaterial; it instead only represents "joy" and "sweetness". Here the reader sees another instance of the concept expressed in *Time in a Red Coat* that the larger use of symbolism is to express joy. As in the previous novel, it remains an unsatisfactory explanation of Brown's literary motivations, but through these two novels he has more fully explicated the ways in which symbol and history are necessarily interconnected. For Brown, then, symbols are worth no more on their own than history; it is only in their relation that both achieve meaning and become more accurate bearers of truth. Thus, at his death, Ranald speaks of returning to Vinland, as he has throughout the novel, but then says: "'But I'm not sailing to Vinland. The island lies away beyond Vinland. I have it all mapped in my head'" (V 230). The imaginary mental destination has at this point become as real and as plausible as the physical one, in part because that physical destination has itself rescinded into myth. Ranald has followed the abbot's advice about believing in a garden, an Eden, and thus even at the point where his Edenic past is far removed, he still makes it his destination.

Clearly Brown's thesis in this latter portion of the novel is primarily concerned with Christian ideas of faith and free will; as much as it traces the life of one man, it is also the story of a spiritual journey from a belief in fate to a trust in free will. However, given all that has come before, it is difficult not to see the novel as being concerned with the uses of literature and myth in daily life. It is extremely tempting to argue that in these two novels (and by extension the majority of his fiction), Brown is arguing in favour of this mythic, symbolic level of being: that the transformation of the physical Vinland into

a spiritual ideal is right and proper; that war is best seen not as individual conflict but as a dragon. The mythic is a way to approach a comprehensive truth of being which cannot be grasped in its totality. In an early version of the passage cited above, Peter the abbot argues that: “The whole totality of early existance (sic) can only be weighed and estimated by the wisdom and lore that is before the beginning and after the end. We see, as it were through the slit window of a little cell, and we make guesses at where the whole truth might reside – a very prideful and stupid presumption on our part.”⁸⁵ The mythic may not be empirically validated, but it allows the individual to be “made aware [of] a great circumambient glory”; the value of the mythic is not in itself, but in the way in which it points to an invisible whole. This explanatory function of myth has to a certain extent been placed at the centre of the predominant critical and popular view of Brown’s work, as will be shown in the next chapter’s discussion of *Greenvoe* and mythologies of community. However, as in *Magnus*, Brown is careful always to keep present the rude actualities of lived experience, especially political experience, in order to demonstrate that this heightened symbolic life is not in itself complete. In this final chapter, for instance, when the reader would expect a conventional spiritual journey to end with some sort of revelation of enlightenment, Brown almost completely leaves Ranald’s narrative in order to focus on Earl Thorfinn and his nephew, Earl Rognvald. The account closely follows that of the *Orkneyinga Saga* and is largely inserted to demonstrate that, just as the earl who is in power makes “little difference at Breckness or the crofts” (*V* 201), the spiritual journey Ranald is undergoing is equally unimportant to those in power, or in fact any besides himself. If *Vinland* is a constant diminuendo, a continual minimalising of the story’s scope from its opening intercontinental adventure to

the final small and almost irrelevant death of the protagonist, Brown continues to emphasise that the larger world outside Ranald continues to move on, that as his life has less and less impact on the world around him, others rise to take his place.

Brown does not insert material from the *Saga* here purely for historical grounding, but again to show the role of the literary narrative in the formulation of historical understanding. This portion of the *Saga* is filled with the work of the poet Arnor; each episode is retold in verse after its straightforward prose rendition (a trope repeated later in the *Saga* when the next Earl Rognvald makes verses about his own life). The work of Arnor is used as a reference point throughout: virtually every passage of battle ends with a linking phrase such as “In the words of Arnor” or “as Arnor the Earl’s-Poet says”, and is followed by the relevant verse.⁸⁶ This mixture of historical narrative and its retelling is of primary concern to Brown:

All these forays and raids deep into Scotland – they could scarcely be called skirmishes, far less battles – were celebrated resoundingly by Earl Thorfinn’s poet, Arnor the laureate, in the hall of a captured keep, while the clan chief sought shelter in some corrie from the snow. (*V* 195)

Just as Brown has included similar heroic verses in his own novel, he points to Arnor’s work as a mythologization of rather mundane events in peacetime, in a place of refuge. The literary retelling of history is thus both an elevated approach to history and one which incorporates deceit, for Arnor magnifies the events at hand past the point of accuracy. Literature must thus be looked at with suspicion, for while these myths and symbols can be used as a path towards a truer account of given events than what might be apparent from an eyewitness, as in the nameless poet’s version of the battle at Clontarf, they can also distract the listener from the truth by making resounding victories of battles which were barely worth recounting. Literature’s tropes are thus simultaneously

necessary and misleading; in Brown's search in these two novels for a way in which to depict historical truth properly (and to make it relevant to a contemporary audience), he remains constantly self-aware of the difficulty of advancing an argument in favour of this mythic view of the past. The discussion of Arnor's work in *Vinland* is a mirror to the discussions of worn metaphors in *Time in a Red Coat*: both point to the ultimate impossibility of honest and new literature without abandoning the effort to make it truthful all the same.

Some of Brown's dilemma can be seen in an earlier account of Viking life in the Orkneys, Eric Linklater's *Men of Ness*, which Brown heralded as giving him "great delight" (FI 63). Linklater's vision of Orkney's past initially appears to be completely at odds with Brown's: his Vikings are rough men, unconcerned with pastoral life but only with action and revenge. Indeed, like the depiction of Vikings in Neil M. Gunn's 1933 novel *Sun Circle*, Linklater's focus is almost entirely on the visceral thrill of violent life. The larger political mechanisms with which Brown is concerned in *Vinland* and *Magnus* do not interest Linklater: it is enough to say that "There was no law [in the Orkneys], and he who was strongest was commonly held to have the best chance in any dispute that arose".⁸⁷ As D'Arcy demonstrates, many of the themes and events in the novel are borrowed from various Icelandic sagas;⁸⁸ the novel is in many ways an attempt to create an unmitigated version of Orkney's past, without Brown's narrative intrusions and explanations. The reader must assume, as in a reading of the sagas from which the novel is drawn, that the revenge motif is enough in itself to drive the story, and rather than attempting to understand the story's relevance to contemporary life, see it as a straightforward account of an earlier age. Linklater is certainly successful in this regard:

Men of Ness is more of a “boy’s story” than *Vinland*. However, in the secondary character of Gauk, larger concerns about the value of storytelling begin to creep into the novel. Gauk is the character most engaged with the supernatural (a significant portion of the novel is concerned with Kol’s (the novel’s primary hero) helping of Gauk in the re-killing of his trollish, dead first wife); the most homesick (““I wish I were there [in Calfskin] now,’ he said, ‘with my wife setting a dish of bacon before me, a bowl of ale, and a cheese of Blackie’s milk. Calfskin is a fine place, and I have a good wife.””⁸⁹); and, most importantly, the only one of the heroes to survive the attack on Ivar the Boneless, revenge of whom forms the thrust of the novel. The end of the book shows Gauk at home, at peace, a very poor Viking but a much better storyteller.

One of the recurring phrases in the novel is that “only the nameless man lives out his life”. In the character of Gauk, however, Linklater presents the reader with a man who will indeed live out his life and retain his name, although he is neither witty nor brave, neither a good farmer, fisherman nor warrior: “Gauk lived out his life in Calfskin, and did no more fighting. But he told many stories of what he had seen, and broke several notches in Leg-biter [his sword] to show how heavy had been his blows.”⁹⁰ Gauk thus becomes a storyteller and a liar and is rewarded with a much longer, and possibly happier, life than the novel’s purported heroes. This transformation of a character the reader has hitherto only seen as a comic foil into both a survivor and, in his embrace of a more sedate existence, the most modern of the characters presented, retroactively creates an elegiac tone for the entire novel. As much as Linklater is celebrating Viking life – D’Arcy, indeed, calls the novel “a personal tribute” to both the Vikings and the saga tradition itself⁹¹ – the emergence of Gauk as a storyteller casts a fictive light over the

preceding pages. The Viking life can only be understood through the prism of storytelling, rather than through a continued lived experience. The reader is already aware that Gauk is given to the manipulation of events in order to increase his own stature; with the knowledge that he, by virtue of being the only survivor, is the palimpsest through which the reader receives the story heightens the awareness that the story is itself constructed. The Vikings are presented as living in a less stable world, where even names are transitory: Thorlief Coalbiter is called ““Thorlief Bed-presser, Thorlief Blanket-warm, Thorlief Mattress-mate, or what you will”” by his son (as part of a ruse to defeat invaders).⁹² Insofar as the names in the novel reflect action rather than, as in *Vinland*, heredity, Linklater leads the reader to understand, if only retroactively, that the entire novel has been an attempt to view these characters both as historical figures, emblematic of a given era, but also as figures within a story whose identity is formed by intervening authorship. It is the storyteller who survives, not the characters within the story. And so Linklater’s novel, while far less immediately self-reflexive than Brown’s, introduces a similar idea in the understanding of the historical novel: the past cannot be understood without recourse to the fictional and, in the reading of these works as novels *qua* novels, the fictional cannot properly be understood without being grounded in the past.

The two authors also unite in their conception of stories as granting their heroes entrance to Valhalla. Arnor, who emerges as one of the major characters in *Vinland*, is praised for his bravery in battle as well as his poetry, but it is further given to be understood that the battle, in a certain sense, does not exist without the documentation of it:

if Thorfinn didn't allow him into the heart of the action, it was because he considered that, in reality, any battle was a charade and a shadow-play unless a poet carved the action deeply upon the granite, so that men would remember the hero's achievements for many generations. These verses were a kind of passport to Valhalla. (*V* 167)

Within the context of the novel, such statements are clearly a voicing of an ancient conceit of heroism. Yet, for all his subtle exploration within these two novels of the ways in which myth and history enrich each other, Brown occasionally argues too forcefully in favour of the former. As much as a passage such as that above demands examination within a given historical context, and not to serve as an expression of Brown's own philosophy, there are similar passages sprinkled throughout Brown's fiction in which he makes similar claims to the fundamentally spiritual nature of art. In "The Sea-King's Daughter", another story of the medieval north, Brown claims that: "a story is a treaty between us and all the creatures. That we belong to one another. That we're parts of a single web, most subtle and delicate. Who strikes the seal on the rock makes a gash in the world. Who puts an axe to a tree wounds stone and star and himself."⁹³ Here Brown uses almost identical language to describe story-telling itself to that used in *Vinland* as Ranald reflects on Indian life prior to the battle at Clontarf. Literature, in this perspective, becomes not a means through which one can better approach history, but in itself an echo of some Edenic, non-human truth. To follow this argument would lead to the expression that myth is indeed of a different or higher order than history and that the truths expressed in art and nature are separate from those learned through lived experience. This is a disquieting interpretation, and one which surfaces often in Brown's work. The story-telling explained here is not that of the nameless poet who writes about Clontarf, in which abstracted poem and narrated individual experience are contrasted as

different approaches to the same truth, but is now something ethereal, removed. There is an implicit argument contained here that stories can function as a passport to Valhalla because they are, in some sense, already otherworldly.

It is almost impossible to simply rectify the apparent contradiction between a work such as “The Sea-King’s Daughter” and parts of *Vinland*, in which myth, story and symbol (for, again, despite the great differences between these concepts, Brown seems to use them interchangeably) are glorified, and a novel such as *Time in a Red Coat*, in which the ultimate impossibility of these myths and stories is examined. In the next chapters the dangers of the former view will be more closely examined; for the moment, it will have to suffice to argue that, in Brown’s later fiction, his views on the interrelation of myth and history lie somewhere between complicated and confused. Brown frequently can be seen to argue that the symbolic element, conveyed through the means of narrative, is that which is used to shape our understanding of the world and to give order to what might not ordinarily possess it. At the same time, Brown also attempts to undermine this reading of the value of art, especially in works such as *Time in a Red Coat*, through his insistence on the ambiguity of artistic interpretation.

Brown’s work can be read as a privileging of an aestheticised, neo-Hegelian view of art, and the perils of this view must be more closely examined. For Hegel, as mentioned above, “art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs [that is, to be the bearer of truth] which earlier ages and nations sought in it”,⁹⁴ but at the same time art “only fulfils its supreme task when it has placed itself in the same sphere as religion and philosophy, and when it is simply one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the Divine”.⁹⁵ For Hegel, then, a true work of art is something removed from the natural,

something that “now belongs to the territory of the spirit [...] for everything spiritual is better than any product of nature”.⁹⁶ Art, in its spiritual sense, is that which remedies the inherent deficiencies of nature. In the case of Brown, the Hegelian view of “nature” must be expanded to include human history as well; while Hegel never makes this comparison explicit, it is clear that, for him, the natural encompasses all that is tangible or actual, while spiritual lives in the realm of the ideal, and it is only art which can approach the ideal. For Brown, in *Vinland*, the idealised form of Vinland remedies the flaws which are found in the actual physicohistorical conceptualisation of that land. The damage which is inflicted by the West on the land itself becomes less meaningful when it is still possible to maintain this ideal form which is forever untouched by despoilers. Here he again follows from Hegel, for whom art in its purest form is not used to reflect on the actual, or to give better understanding to the actual, but to express the ideal. This creates a dichotomy between the human and art.

Brown also adopts a more conventionally eco-poetic view, in which the “natural” itself is made ideal. When Brown speaks of “nature” he focuses on the idyllic pastoral, embodied in Vinland. Brown thus, in certain passages in *Vinland* and in some of his stories, elevates both art and nature to the level of the spiritual, and is content to work with them on that elevated level. This is a firm rebuttal to much of *Time in a Red Coat*, in which he explores not only how art can be used to understand human life, but also how human life can be used to understand art, an exploration which both follows from and runs counter to Hegel’s writings on symbolism. For Hegel, the symbolic order is the way through which:

art has reached its own essential nature by bringing the Idea, as spiritual individuality, directly into harmony with its bodily reality in such a perfect way

that external existence now for the first time no longer preserves any independence in contrast with the meaning which it is to express.⁹⁷

This chapter's reading of Brown has focused on the ways in which he both embraces this view, using myth (for Brown, the clearest expression of artistic sensibility) in order to comment on the actual world, but also explores the difficulties of that mythic view.

Certainly there is a divide between *Vinland*, which is largely concerned with the former elevation of the artistic sensibility over the observance of the psychohistorical universe, and *Time in a Red Coat*, which remains far more ambiguous, largely arguing that neither art nor, for want a better word to describe its counter, empirical observation are capable in themselves of actually approaching any sort of truth or ideal, but only approach that end through their intermingling.

A retort to this paradoxical view can be found in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. For Hegel, Adorno argues, "natural beauty gains legitimacy only by its decline, in such a way that its deficiency becomes the *raison d'être* of art beauty".⁹⁸ As follows from the preceding discussion of Adorno's dialectics in *Beside the Ocean of Time*, Adorno is here concerned with the will to domination. What he finds notable in natural beauty is its very "characteristic of escaping from fixed concept"⁹⁹ and the way in which natural beauty is not defined or dominated by the spirit. If Hegel sees art as a way in which to overcome the otherness of nature (and what he perceives as nature's deficiency in not being wholly spiritual), this otherness is for Adorno the very substance of natural beauty. The beauty of the world resides in its resistance to domination, either by humans or by conceptualisations of what beauty should ultimately be. Adorno follows this argument with the surprising assertion that if nature is not wholly spiritual, neither is art: the

spiritual in art only emerges through development and formation.¹⁰⁰ It is in this notion of the spiritual arising through development and formation that we can reapproach *Time in a Red Coat* and, to a lesser extent, *Vinland*. Brown initially foregrounds the ways in which natural beauty is put into decline by the very people who create the art which celebrates it. The Masquer, at the opening of *Time in a Red Coat*, creates an artform that will “celebrate the beauty and terror of death” (*TRC* 6) even as real death, in the form of invasion, cuts off the work of art. Art is thus, in a Hegelian sense, pointing to the deficiency in nature even as it forms those deficiencies. And yet in his discussions of metaphor and symbol Brown is following an Adornian paradigm, arguing here that the novel as a work of art is not automatically elevated to a spiritual level, but is instead only capable of attaining that level through the formation of these aesthetics. This notion of development is what finally ties *Time in a Red Coat* to seemingly divergent artistic impulses in *Vinland*; Brown is interested not in the inherent spirituality of art, but in the way in which that spirituality is formed. This is why *Vinland* takes so many different forms throughout the novel, from psychohistorical actuality to being the subject of the stories Ranald tells the king of Norway to serving as a reflection of the stories of Tir-nan-og told around the banquet hall to, finally, in conversation with Peter the abbot, seeming to serve as a symbol of heaven. As Adorno writes, “Precisely through its progressive spiritualization, through its division from nature, art wants to revoke this division from which it suffers and which inspires it”.¹⁰¹ It is this division which primarily interests Brown, and in the interplay of these two novels that he attempts to both address the division and, to a certain extent, heal it, without losing the inspiration that the division allows.

It is thus possible to see in these two novels the formation of a complex, if often inconsistent, theory about the relation between nature and art and, more specifically, between the actualities of history and their subsumption or reflection in myth and symbol. In *Time in a Red Coat* Brown attempts to avoid the privileging of myth and symbol as myth and symbol, but instead uses them to understand the actualities of human existence. To a certain extent the novel here echoes *Magnus*, in which Brown argues that the way to understand the death of Magnus is both through its symbolism and its very real historical and political implications. In *Vinland* he attempts to trace the development of an idea from historical observation to symbolic import in order to stress upon the reader that symbols are not born out of nothing or emergent from some abstracted spiritual realm, but that the very reason they can be used to lend order to a natural/historical/physical existence is because they are themselves drawn from such an existence, and that it is in their development in art that they achieve any sort of special level of meaning. Following Hegel, then, Brown is in these two novels attempting to show the way in which art, through the mediation of the symbolic order, can illuminate the natural, with a focus in this instance on the historical, a surprising conflation which becomes apparent throughout the body of Brown's work, in which the events of history, whether in *Vinland* or the Orkneys, are specifically tied to a natural existence and seen as being emergent from nature. This project has echoes throughout Brown's work, whether in novels such as *Magnus* or short stories such as "Magi". In these two novels, however, Brown is engaging with those themes that an Adornian reading of Hegel makes explicit, in which any privileging of the artistic comes through its formation, rather than through an automatic unity with the spiritual. In this ultimately bold project, Brown is reflecting on

the ultimate goals of art, and the different ways in which art can be used to illuminate nature in all of its forms. Here there is a reconciliation between the pronouncements of such works as “The Sea-King’s Daughter”, in which art is presented as a means towards understanding because of its ethereal nature, and *Time in a Red Coat*, in which the honesty of art is continually questioned. Art, finally, only comes to approach truth because it is grounded in the natural and the historical, but yet the natural and historical cannot be understood without recourse to art.

Before leaving these two novels, a final Hegelian coda must be added about the ways in which this interplay of the natural, the artistic and the spiritual is formative of community. As detailed above, for Hegel art is the sensuous revelation of the spiritual, and through the symbolic, the way in which the spiritual is able to reflect upon and react to the physical. This becomes a reflection, too, about the nature of the individual in relation to the community. For Hegel:

The community is the spiritual reflection into itself of this sensuous existent, and is animating subjectivity and inwardness. With these, therefore, it comes about that the determining principle, alike for the content of art and for the material that represents it outwardly, is particularization and individualization and their requisite subjective apprehension.¹⁰²

Hegel is here specifically writing about architecture, but his theory applies to all art. The community makes manifest the spiritual, or rather, becomes the physical reflection of the spiritual, but only insofar as it makes the spiritual particular. In order to reflect the communal and spiritual, “art has likewise to show itself particularized in itself and appropriate to subjective inwardness”.¹⁰³ Art can thus only become relevant to the community when it is made individual. Or, to follow from Nancy’s view of community: art is most relevant to a community when it is least like history. Here we see an echo of

the theory expressed above that the storyteller forms a community through the telling of the story; the individual author, and the individual story, are through this interplay of the natural and the spiritual able to express themselves fully to the community at large and, in effect, create that community through the telling. Here, then, there is something of a counter-argument to the Heideggerian notion discussed above that as art is made subjective nature and history are objectified. The subjectivisation of art is, for Hegel, a means towards a great expression of community, for in its particularisation, it becomes more fully integrated with that community.

This is clearly only a cursory discussion of the interplay between individual and community. However, following the above notion that Brown in these novels is attempting to reflect not an ordering of nature and spirit, but rather their interplay as expressed through history and literature, it becomes clear that, for Brown, it is literature in its particularities which both creates and reflects the community. This serves as a basis for the wide-ranging and almost impossible scope of these two novels, whether it be the temporal scope of *Time in a Red Coat* or the geographical range of *Vinland*. In making these novels so broad and yet still particular, Brown begins to explain his project in his more localised, parochial fictions, as will be examined in the next two chapters.

Literature, specifically literature that reflects upon history, is here used to create a dual community of those it describes and its readers. In taking on such ambitious themes, Brown occasionally falters, but his overall purpose remains clear: in both of these novels, an improbable or even impossible community is created, whether it is that of those who observe war in the former novel or those who yearn for peace in the latter. This is

ultimately no different than the communities Brown creates in his Orkney-based fiction:
it is through an art based in history but also removed from it that community is created.

NOTES

¹ Here Derrida's reading of Husserl and his separation of historicity and history are important: Derrida designates historicity as "the always intersubjective consciousness of history". Although most often framed as a reading of Heidegger, this basic relation between history and historicity underlies much of the following chapter. Jacques Derrida, Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press/Bison Books, 1989) 29.

² Brown himself wryly notes in his autobiography that *Time in a Red Coat* "was not received with rapture" (*FI* 177).

³ Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (1987; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) 27.

⁴ Another contemporary discussion of these issues can be found in Brown's play The Voyage of Saint Brandon (Plays 81-150). One of Brown's more stridently strange works, the play advances the argument that, while art and history rarely have anything to do with each other, the version of the past found in art is ultimately more compelling, and indeed more truthful, than that found in historical accounts.

⁵ Catherine T. Zuckert, "Martin Heidegger: His Philosophy and His Politics," Political Theory 18.1 Feb. 1990: 70.

⁶ Anthony J. Cascardi, "The Difficulty of Art," boundary 2 25.1 Spring, 1998: 58.

⁷ Jameson, Political Unconscious 250.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, What is Called Thinking?, 1954, trans. J. Glenn Gray (1968; New York: Harper & Row/Harper Colophon, 1972) 102-4.

⁹ Quoted in Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel, 1962, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1989) 61.

¹⁰ Lukács 63.

¹¹ Sir Walter Scott, Ivanhoe (1820; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 17-8.

¹² Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row/Harper Torchbooks, 1977) 127.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, "Hegel and the Greeks," trans. Robert Metcalf, Pathmarks, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 333.

¹⁴ Heidegger, Question 136.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, 1971, trans. Albert Hofstadter (1975; New York: HarperCollins/Perennial Torchbooks, 2001) 69-70.

¹⁶ Heidegger, Poetry 58.

¹⁷ Heidegger, Poetry 60.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, On the Way to Language, 1959, trans. Peter D. Hertz (1971; New York: HarperCollins/HarperSanFrancisco, 1982) 14.

¹⁹ Heidegger, On the Way to Language 69.

²⁰ Quoted in Heidegger, Question 136.

²¹ Heidegger, Question 133. Italics in original.

²² Hilda D. Spear, "The Novels," George Mackay Brown: A Survey of His Work and a Full Bibliography, ed. Spear (Lewiston, NY and Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000) 90.

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- ²³ George Mackay Brown, Time in a Red Coat (London: Chatto & Windus/Hogarth Press, 1984) 11-12. Hereafter cited in text as *TRC*.
- ²⁴ The images of the dove and the dragon are here repeated from Brown's 1971 poem cycle *Fishermen with Ploughs*, in which the dragon is "the shorthand of myth" for "starvation, pestilence [and] turbulent neighbours", as well as "black pentecostal fire". Brown, Collected Poems 89.
- ²⁵ John Burns, "Myth and Marvels," The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies, ed. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993) 72.
- ²⁶ David Profumo, "She of the Black Brown Hair," Times Literary Supplement 15 June 1984: 676.
- ²⁷ George Mackay Brown, "Et in Orcadia Ego: On the Dreams of War and Peace Which Inspired Time in a Red Coat," Ms. 3116.2. (University of Edinburgh Library) 3,4.
- ²⁸ Schoene, 250-1.
- ²⁹ Brown, "Et in Orcadia Ego" 7.
- ³⁰ George Mackay Brown, Time in a Red Coat Ms. 2841.1.2.4 F.4 (University of Edinburgh Library).
- ³¹ Murray and Murray 197.
- ³² "Metaphorical Magic in Time of War," rev. of Time in a Red Coat, by George Mackay Brown, Scotsman 2 June 1984, Weekend: 3.
- ³³ Brown, Time MS. 2841.1
- ³⁴ Brown, Andrina 125.
- ³⁵ Schoene 240.
- ³⁶ Profumo 676.
- ³⁷ Schoene 247.
- ³⁸ Profumo 676.
- ³⁹ Schoene 240.
- ⁴⁰ Schoene 255.
- ⁴¹ Schoene 247.
- ⁴² Eavan Boland, Collected Poems (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995) 28.
- ⁴³ Boland 28-9.
- ⁴⁴ Douglas Gifford, "The Richest Collection in Years," Books in Scotland 15 Summer 1984: 12. Italics in original.
- ⁴⁵ Profumo 676.
- ⁴⁶ Bann, Stephen Bann, "Red," London Review of Books 6.12 5 July – 18 July 1984: 18.
- ⁴⁷ "Metaphorical Magic" 3.
- ⁴⁸ Michael Wood, "We Offered Them Their Chance," London Review of Books 27.11 2 June 2005: 8.
- ⁴⁹ Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, vol. 1, 1983, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984) ix.
- ⁵⁰ Ricoeur, Time and Narrative v.1 xi. Please see Schoene 17-27 and 240-257 for fuller discussions, albeit with a different focus than the one presented here, of Ricoeur's work in relation to Time in a Red Coat.
- ⁵¹ Sanford Schwartz, "Hermeneutics and the Productive Imagination: Paul Ricoeur in the 1970s," Journal of Religion 63.3 July 1983: 296.

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- ⁵² Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language, 1975, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 247.
- ⁵³ Ricoeur, Time and Narrative v.1 3.
- ⁵⁴ Ricoeur, Time and Narrative v.1 30.
- ⁵⁵ Ricoeur, Time and Narrative v.1 52.
- ⁵⁶ White 175.
- ⁵⁷ White 3.
- ⁵⁸ White 57.
- ⁵⁹ David Carr, "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity," History and Theory 25.2 May 1986: 117-131.
- ⁶⁰ Brown, Time Ms. 2841.1, F. 79.
- ⁶¹ The anti-nuclear message of the novel is a late addition, added to make the novel more currently topical. In early drafts, the final exhibit consists of images from the Vietnam War.
- ⁶² Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace, 1865-8, trans. Rosemary Edmonds. (1957; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Classics, 1985) 1408).
- ⁶³ Schoene 252.
- ⁶⁴ Brown, Andrina 76.
- ⁶⁵ Brown, Andrina 72-3.
- ⁶⁶ Brown, Andrina 76.
- ⁶⁷ Brown, Andrina 90.
- ⁶⁸ Douglas Dunn, "The Supernatural *Frisson*," Times Literary Supplement 1 April, 1983: 324.
- ⁶⁹ Nancy, Birth to Presence 143.
- ⁷⁰ Heidegger, Being and Time 438. Interestingly, Nancy does not cite the final five words of this sentence, which changes its import significantly.
- ⁷¹ Nancy, Birth to Presence 156.
- ⁷² Murray and Murray 238.
- ⁷³ Like many of Brown's novels, *Vinland* is built on the framework of an earlier poem, in this case "Vinland" from the 1983 collection *Voyages*. Brown, Collected Poems 212-213.
- ⁷⁴ Jonathan Coe, "Sydney's Inferno." London Review of Books 14.18 24 Sept. 1992: 22.
- ⁷⁵ D'Arcy 277.
- ⁷⁶ Greg Garrard, Ecocriticism (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 93.
- ⁷⁷ D'Arcy 278-9.
- ⁷⁸ Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, vol. 2, 1983, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 96.
- ⁷⁹ Ricoeur, Time and Narrative v.2 100.
- ⁸⁰ Lukács 139.
- ⁸¹ Ricoeur, Time and Narrative v.2 113.
- ⁸² This is indeed strange and somewhat disappointing, for much of Brown's best writing lies in his few completely fantastic/romantic stories, such as "A Winter Legend" in *Andrina* or "Stone, Salt, and Rose" in *The Sun's Net*.
- ⁸³ Andrew Wawn, "Access to Eden," Times Literary Supplement 28 Aug. 1992: 18.

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- ⁸⁴ Fridtjof Nansen, "The Norsemen in America," Geographical Journal 38.6 Dec. 1911: 567.
- ⁸⁵ George Mackay Brown, "Vinland – Not to Use". Ms. 3116.1. (University of Edinburgh Library).
- ⁸⁶ Orkneyinga Saga 59-76.
- ⁸⁷ Eric Linklater, The Men of Ness: The Saga of Thorlief Coalbiter's Sons (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932) 13.
- ⁸⁸ D'Arcy 207.
- ⁸⁹ Linklater 204.
- ⁹⁰ Linklater 287.
- ⁹¹ D'Arcy 204.
- ⁹² Linklater 80.
- ⁹³ George Mackay Brown, The Sea-King's Daughter/Eureka! (Nairn: Balnain Books, 1991) 45.
- ⁹⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, vol. 1, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Clarendon Press, 1975) 10.
- ⁹⁵ Hegel, Aesthetics 7.
- ⁹⁶ Hegel, Aesthetics 29.
- ⁹⁷ Hegel, Aesthetics 301.
- ⁹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 1970, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 76.
- ⁹⁹ Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 76.
- ¹⁰⁰ Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 91.
- ¹⁰¹ Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 92.
- ¹⁰² Hegel, Aesthetics 85.
- ¹⁰³ Hegel, Aesthetics 86.

Chapter 4

The Fictive Community: *Greenvoe*

“Community is what takes place always through others and for others. It is not the space of the *egos* – subjects and substances that are at bottom immortal – but of the *I*s, who are always *others* (or else are nothing).”¹ – Jean-Luc Nancy

The preceding three chapters have demonstrated the centrality of community in George Mackay Brown’s novels. Even though I have been arguing for the resonance of the concept of community throughout Brown’s work, it is in *Greenvoe* that he most consistently focuses on the community as that which is immediate and immanent. *Greenvoe* offers a discussion of community as the local. It is Brown’s use of this commonplace understanding of community – for, as William Corlett argues, the most commonly agreed upon definition of community within political theory is that “community names a geographical location”² – that allows him to offer his most penetrating analysis of the modern community as impossible or inoperative.

An understanding of community as the locus of a regional or political identity underpinned many contemporary political and social theories of community. The anthropologist Susan Love Brown, for instance, has argued that communities, understood as microcosmic societies in themselves, constitute “a powerful means of integrating the individual and society”.³ Studies in the literature of place have built upon this notion of the community, in particular the rural community, as a locus of unity and integration which cannot be found in the context of a larger culture. As Robert M. Dainotto has recently argued, it is a commonplace thought to believe that: “the old nationalistic dream of cultural unity [...] today finds in the rural areas of regionalism its sole possibility to survive”.⁴ These theories follow in part from Charles Taylor’s seminal work on plurality

and political fragmentation, which he sees as yielding an individual focus on the singular community as opposed to a world, or even national, culture. There is thus a two-fold tradition of regarding the community, both in the world and in literary representation, as a microcosmic exemplar of society and as that which replaces and resists fragmentation. This perspective on the value of community has been assumed in the majority of critical work on Brown, whom David Annwn calls: “A poet of an island community who, through his work, has been committed to identify himself with that community”.⁵ In Annwn’s reading, Brown makes use of the real community in which he was born as a “significant microcosm” which sheds light on human behaviour.⁶ As will be shown in the next chapter, the Orkney community about which Brown writes is, for Annwn and numerous additional commentators, both a microcosmic representation of the interaction of individuals and society and an attempt to present a unified whole in a fragmented world. Yet Brown’s represented community is itself fragmented.

In *Greenvoe*, Brown is most interested in seeing what happens when a community does not cohere: he details the effects on a community when it becomes nothing more than a group of individuals who are concerned not with their relation to others, nor their own otherness, but with the construction of their own individual narratives. At the same time, Brown advances a modern notion of the plural community, where the community is viewed as an impossible whole which cannot be understood as a totality, but only through the differences between the singularities it encompasses. As shown in previous chapters, in his later novels Brown focuses on the construction of community through shared history and myth and through the embrace and vilification of progress. Here, however, he is primarily concerned with the community of individuals, a community which will

necessarily fail, but is also the only possibility of community in modern life. What is most striking about the novel is not the way in which its various narratives coalesce, but the way in which they finally fail to form a whole. In sharp contrast to *Magnus*, in which the variety of registers and voicings is used to create a unified picture of both a given individual and the community which surrounds him, or *Beside the Ocean of Time*, in which a dying community is given renewed life through recourse to its past, *Greenvoe* is perhaps the least redemptive of Brown's novels, a story of the ways in which it is not progress, or outside influence, which damn a community, but its inhabitants themselves. Black Star, a Cold War operation as vague in purpose as the occupying power which comes to Norday at the end of *Beside the Ocean of Time*, is the ready-made villain of the novel, and its eviction of the residents provides the basis for Francis Russell Hart's claim that *Greenvoe* is "the serious novel of latter-day Clearances."⁷ However, the novel also functions as a refutation of the very idea of community in the modern age. Despite Brown's avowed yearnings for community, in *Greenvoe* he suggests that community itself might be essentially impossible, an idea made explicit in Nancy's claim that "it is precisely the immanence of man to man [...] that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community".⁸

The novel's first chapter initially supports Schoene's claim that "*Greenvoe* reflects Brown's desire to present Orkney's communal identity in all its individual and communal, historical and contemporary aspects".⁹ Indeed, close to a third of Murray and Tait's pivotal discussion of the novel is centred on this first section, the portion of the novel most easily related to Brown's prior works, as well as to those of Dylan Thomas, D. H. Lawrence and other avowed influences.¹⁰ Early reviews were quick to note

Brown's debt to *Under Milk Wood*. Derek Stanford, in a moderately favourable review in the *Scotsman*, wrote that "Greenvoe is clearly Milkwood transplanted far northward."¹¹ Many other notices focused on the redundancies of the novel, especially in its echoes of Brown's earlier work, which is almost entirely centred on small Orkney communities. "How much longer can [Brown] beat over the same territory?" asked Michael Scott-Moncrieff in the *Glasgow Herald*.¹² The novel has thus been traditionally read as one of avowed community, in which the ideas of human interaction established in the opening chapter are sustained throughout. The often begrudging tone of these reviews arises from the novel's failure to maintain a consistent tone that is in keeping with the first chapter: what begins as a humorous, realist work ultimately becomes something much more strange.

The tension between the ideal of community and the difficulty of understanding any grouping of individuals as a collective whole is presented from the first page. The first five chapters of the novel are formally constructed around the course of a day, beginning at dawn and ending after dark. Brown here nods to a classical unity of time and space which he will for the remainder of the novel continually disrupt. The natural world, signified not according to seasons, as in so much of his work, but in values of light and dark, is thus presented as a unifying force which is alternately embraced or disrupted by the people in it, but is not in any way transcendent. In his first three sentences, Brown depicts first the natural world, then the village, then the individual inhabitants, a sequence which initially appears to prescribe a natural order of understanding: "Slowly the night shadow passed from the island and the Sound. In the village of Greenvoe lights burned in the windows of three fishermen's cottages above the

pier. A small dark knotted man came out of one of the doors” (*G* 9). This pattern is familiar from Brown’s early stories, such as “A Calendar of Love”, in which the life of the individual is presented as being best understood with regards to the natural world, to the seasons and weather and landscape. The first chapter, largely concerned with introducing the townsfolk and their landscape, is indeed closely tied to much of the prose Brown had published thus far: it is an explication of what Raymond Williams calls the “many meanings” of country life,¹³ given to direct statements of pastoral calm:

Afternoon was always the quietest time in the village. The fishermen were still at sea. The crofters had not yet unyoked. There was little sound in Greenvoe on a summer afternoon but the murmur of multiplication tables through the tall school window, and the drone of bluebottles among Mr Joseph Evie’s confectionery, and the lapping of water against the pier. (*G* 17)

These idyllic passages are interspersed with the essentially comic dialogue that takes place at the general store. The community of Greenvoe exists in the juxtaposition of the natural and the man-made and in the tension between interactions with the land and those with other people. The Skarf, the self-appointed town historian, speaks in an uncommonly poetic register which initially appears to mark him out as an individual who does not fully engage with the community: ““And this is all we know about the first dwellers in the island: the solemn state in which they passed into the kingdom of death, as if life was a shadow and death the hard reality. Of the villages where they passed their days nothing remains”” (*G* 28). He is, all the same, a type familiar from Brown’s previous (and, indeed, later) works. As a chronicler of the community, he necessarily exists at a remove, here signified by his rarefied language, but he is also integral to the community’s self-recognition.

A. The Writing of the Disaster

The final passage in this chapter, however, hints at what will become Brown's dominant theme in the remainder of the novel: the desire of the characters to see themselves in a larger, perhaps fictional, drama than that of the given island community. Six men and a boy gather in a farm for the "first of six initiation rites into the Ancient Mystery of The Horsemen" (G 33). Solemnity and sobriety are encouraged, and the rite itself concerns the novice's desire to return to a kingdom from which he has been outcast. As Murray and Tait point out, the ritual enacted here is a combination of an ancient Scottish cult, the Horseman's Word, and the Catholic Stations of the Cross.¹⁴ The characters are thus reaching out across traditions to be a part of something larger. While this passage does not depart from the realism of the rest of the chapter, it hints towards a denial of realism which permeates the remainder of the novel. Ultimately, *Greenvoe* is not a "denial of [...] history",¹⁵ as Craig argues, but an exploration of an endemic denial of the complexity of life itself. If anything, the characters fall prey to a desire to appeal too directly to history, to see themselves nostalgically as part of a unified community which can no longer exist. The farmer's desire to make themselves part of an external, intangible community comes at the expense of their engagement in the present physical community around them. It is the desire for something immortal that dooms the community, and it is the individuals' attempts to place themselves within grand narratives that displaces them.

More than in any other of Brown's works, the characters in *Greenvoe* learn who they are through books. Inga Fortin-Bell, the laird's granddaughter, is introduced with a copy of *Women in Love* in her hands; Ivan Westray comforts and torments himself with

the *Orkneyinga Saga* and a book of sermons, *On Love Carnal and Divine*; the Whaness family read nightly from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, *Grace Abiding*, *Meditations Among the Tombs*, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*; Timmy Folster, the impoverished meth addict, is fond of quoting Burns and cheap romances; Johnny, the Sikh peddler, enjoys Hopkins's dark sonnets: the entire community is filled with readers. In a work which begins as something of an agricultural romance, this is initially somewhat surprising; the repeated mentions of books point to a rare inwardness among the characters. Throughout the novel, Brown demonstrates that virtually all of the characters measure their lives not by what is around them, but according to what they have read. This is most clearly seen in the stilted romance between Inga and Ivan, born of her desire to be a character out of Lawrence:

Inga turned over on her belly on the warm rock and cradled her head on her forearms. She would like to be utterly naked under the sun. She remembered the story by D. H. Lawrence called *Sun*. A super story, that. The mindless peasant watching the golden-skinned woman. That was the way Inga would like it to be. [...] But why had Ivan Westray not kissed her last night at the crossroads, when he must have known her whole body was crying out for it? He did not behave like a D. H. Lawrence peasant at all. (*G* 125, 127)

Inga finds fault in her life for its failure to live up to the expectations created by her reading, or rather her mis-reading. "Sun" is, after all, about the "fatal chain of continuity";¹⁶ the heroine may desire a peasant, but she is finally forced to settle for her grey-faced New Yorker husband. The story's opening fairy-tale tone is slowly eroded into language as dull as the central marriage; it is altogether a strange story on which to base one's romantic longing. When Inga, towards the end of the novel, is raped by Ivan, it is quite literally underneath his falling copies of the *Orkneyinga Saga* and *On Love Carnal and Divine*. She is punished for her love of books: Ivan's excuse for his actions,

as it were, is that she is “‘too full of bullshit out of books’” (G 231) and needs to be taught a lesson about the workings of the world. Her desire to live a life suitable for a fictional heroine is ultimately self-destructive. Inga is finally a sort of upper-class Leonard Bast, punished for her desire to enter into a culture from which she does not originate, but only knows through the written word. Murray and Tait dismiss the implications of this passage, arguing only that “the relish of the scene is in the ironic interplay of the three voices, seventeenth-century, twentieth-century and saga”,¹⁷ but this is an insufficient excuse for one of the cruellest moments in all of Brown’s fiction. For Brown’s aim does not appear to be, as in E.M. Forster’s *Howards End*, to highlight insurmountable social hierarchies, but to reprimand a character for an inward turn which is in fact present in almost every character in the novel. The text itself is mocking. The final passage of the scene is a recapitulation of all that has happened in saga-style:

The granddaughter of the chief man in Hellya asked a certain boatman to take her to the sea tower. There was much fog on the way back. The boatman whose name was Ivan forced Inga to lie with him in the cabin of the boat called *Skua*. Inga said he had done her a great wrong that day and that he would suffer for it. Ivan laughed. He said they would see about that. (G 231-2)

What makes this passage so oddly disturbing is that, in the turn towards a new style, Inga has had her wish fulfilled: she is now a character in a story.

The significance of the rape is revealed in the following scene, where the men of the town gather at the hotel as they have at the close of each preceding chapter. They are concerned with the death of Ben Budge – earlier in the novel, Ivan has recommended Budge for “‘good stuff to put in [a] book’” (G 158) – and the rescue of Samuel Whaness by Bert Kerston, for which he has been paid a five pound note from “‘that book in the window. It smelt sort of damp, mildewy’” (G 233). At this final congress, The Skarf

refuses to read aloud from the history of the Orkneys he has been writing, for: ““What’s coming to this island is beyond prose”” (G 234). While The Skarf’s argument is that the future of the island can only be captured in poetry – a sentiment which will be echoed and embellished at the close of *Beside the Ocean of Time* – Brown’s denial of poetry elsewhere in the novel indicates that perhaps The Skarf’s words may be taken at face-value: prose is inadequately equipped to explain either the present or future of the island. Inga’s attempt to understand her life according to what she has read is thus ultimately futile, because prose does not, in this view, allow for the actual future. Prose is a way of measuring the past, but it is finally static. To highlight this, Brown here includes a scene of the unnamed government official who has been writing files on all of the characters throughout the course of the novel, quite literally writing them all out of existence in an act of de-description (or, in Nancy’s term, exscription). The official visits each house and then makes a mark in his notebook, and, like Pontius Pilate, “what he had written, he had written” (G 237). The death or inefficacy of prose is most effectively shown at The Skarf’s house:

The guest stood at The Skarf’s window. Pale sheets of paper scattered on the table inside, every sheet a scarred and clotted battlefield; and the cocoa-lid beside the ball-point pen overflowing with cigarette ends; and six warping creels in the rafters. Books in tea-boxes all over the room, hundreds of them, a few lying open and marked beside the manuscript where *The Children of the Sun* with many a glorious wound on them held a hard-worn ridge of history against trolls and priest and lairds; until the day come. A war on paper.

The guest made a sign of cancellation with his pen. (G 235-6)

The Skarf’s writings encapsulate all the violence of the past, but cannot stand against the violence of modernity itself; what is written can be destroyed. In *Greenvoe* the forces of modernity unwrite all that has been written, and in doing so prove the inefficacy of the written word. Prose is not a sufficient medium with which to record a life; at the end of

the novel, each character is undermined by what has been written about him or her, whether in the form of the official's notes or, in the case of Inga, in the form of an attachment to an outside text. The characters' attachment to books is both what individualises them and makes them vulnerable; their desire to see themselves prosaically lets them be unwritten by outside forces.

These passages initially point to a simple condemnation of reading and writing, similar to that seen in "The Eye of the Hurricane" from *A Time to Keep*. In that story, a novelist, Barclay, comes to Hamnavoe to write on Earl Rognvald¹⁸ and surrounds himself with the works of high culture: Ionescu, Chaucer, Cervantes, Tolstoy, Proust, Alain-Fournier and the like. The novelist sees himself as something apart from the community: "I had come to live, then, among simple uncomplicated people. I worked to the easy regular rhythm of fishermen and crofters. My imagination nourished itself at primitive wholesome sources, the sea and the land."¹⁹ His actions, and his obliviousness to that which actually surrounds him in favour of the works of dead authors, however, contribute to the death of his landlord and rejection by the woman for whom he yearns; the "simple uncomplicated people" are ultimately far more complicated than he allows himself to recognise, and his desire to use a living community as the backdrop for the creation of a solitary art ends with his necessary abandonment of the town. Brown's clear moral in this story is that in order to live in a community, one must enter it fully in a way that reading and writing by themselves do not allow. While he is presumably not advocating a return to illiteracy as such, given his praise of poetry in many other works, Brown is at the very least advising caution when dealing with books: those who spend their time reading, writing and mythologizing that around them ultimately destroy it by making it

other than that which it is. This would initially seem to be the moral of *Greenvoe* as well; the characters' desire to make turn themselves into individual types, of the sort found in their reading, is what makes the community unable to function as such.

Brown's aim in the novel is not so simple, however. If the characters "have too much the air of exhibits",²⁰ if "the island is too much of a brightly lit cyclorama for the action",²¹ as contemporary critics argued, this cannot be only ascribed to the sort of willed primitivism with which Brown is often charged. As Ali Smith argues in her recent introduction to the novel, what Brown "seems to want is for his readers to be aware of the workings of artifice. [...] He wants his readers to wonder about how things go together, and how they unravel, too."²² As Schoene points out, Brown crucially does not focus on the entire community, leaving out the lives of crofters one would expect him to foreground if the novel were a pastoral idyll in favour of depicting the lives of the villagers, those whose lives are most directly affected by the outside world.²³ Equally unexpectedly, as Tom Scott notes, Brown does not centre the novel on an individual hero, as is seen in the modern Scottish tradition of Gibbon, Douglas Brown and many others, instead focusing on a story in which "the community is the hero".²⁴ By confounding the reader's expectations for a novel which either uses community as a backdrop for the story of an individual or details the life of the community as a comprehensive whole, Brown reveals that his project is something different and new. In *Greenvoe*, Brown is interested in the nature of a very specific sort of community, one which is based on the individual rather than the whole, and in the way in which such a community will ultimately reveal itself to lack cohesion. The community comprised of such individuals is no community at all. In his autobiography, Brown repeatedly refers to the characters in *Greenvoe* as

“flat” (*FI* 172-174); not only, perhaps, to indicate the ways in which they conform to types, but also in their inability to interact, to engage in each other’s narratives, or to create a whole, complex, communal narrative. The collapse of community is brought about not only by outside forces such as Black Star, or by internal difficulties arising from literacy (and other artefacts of modernity), but is an outgrowth of the intrinsic nature of communities in the modern age. In Brown’s view, the modern community is unsustainable: in *Greenvoe* he is not advocating a return to a purer communal past, but instead pointing to the impossibility of such a return.

Perhaps the best indication of his greater purpose in the novel is found in an essay on Edwin Muir written concurrently with *Greenvoe*, “The Broken Heraldry.” The essay is as strongly opposed to progress and modernity as any of the more strident passages in *An Orkney Tapestry*, but instead of blaming the arrival of tractors and automobiles, Brown here looks at the dissolving community as a greater cultural reality:

Formerly a people of strongly-marked individuality, the Orcadians are gradually losing their identity – or rather they have willingly merged their identity with the rest of the western world. Many things contribute to this loss: wireless and television, compulsory education, newspapers, the insidious notion that urban ways of life are necessarily superior to rural ways. [...] One senses a growing coldness – the coldness of people who have received the fatal blessing of prosperity.²⁵

While Brown’s examples point to particularly twentieth-century sources of change, he goes on to argue that it was in fact the Reformation that brought about the “break-up” of community: “It was then that the old heraldry began to crack, that the idea of ‘progress’ took root in men’s minds. What was broken, irremediably, in the 16th century was the fullness of life of a community, its single interwoven identity.”²⁶ It is not then, that newspapers and novels have corrupted the individual members of the community, making

it impossible to engage in communal life in a way that would be possible without modern mass media, but that the entire notion of modern community is an impossibility. The community has been eradicated for so long that one cannot return to it, for it is already a distant myth. Schoene sees this focus as a way for Brown to highlight the worth of the individual: “Only rarely does Brown speak of the people of Hellya in collective terms, probably because such a presentation would reduce our awareness of each community member’s unique identity”.²⁷ This view is supported by a passage in “The Broken Heraldry” following those quoted above: “A town like Stromness, even 30 years ago, used to be alive with ‘characters’, the kind of delightfully surrealistic folk you read about in Russian novels. There are less and less of them now. It is as if people were ashamed to be different from one another.”²⁸ And yet the very language in which Brown couches this discussion reveals him to be making a quite contrary point. Given his previously mentioned distrust of prose as a method of revealing truth, his argument that the community has been impossible for centuries, the notion of characters who are “surrealistic”, even if delightfully so, whose precedents come not from their ancestors but from foreign novels, signifies that such individuals are already existing at a remove from any ideal communal way of life. Our “awareness of each community member’s unique identity” is not, in fact, an admirable thing, as Schoene presupposes. It is instead a reflection of the impossibility of presenting a whole, functional community in the modern age.

To hold Calvinism responsible for all that has gone wrong with rural communities in the past four hundred years (as well as “the striking incidence of mental trouble in the islands”²⁹) initially seems to be an over-localised response to the problem of community

in modernity. Certainly, Calvinism has had little or no impact on the similar failings of rural communities in other parts of the world. However, Brown's thesis can be expanded to reflect the absence of a fundamental metanarrative which has become one of the dominant themes of the modern age. As Strydom writes:

Our condition now involves a sifting through the debris of community after the failures of modernity's metanarratives and community's attempt to satisfy all desires and affinities. Rather than resurrect past metanarratives or attempt to assemble any new unifying voice or panopticon, another possibility arises: act on the assumption that narrative will still exist, but with the understanding that narratives are irreducible to each other.³⁰

This "sifting through the debris" is ultimately Brown's project in *Greenoe*. As even the sympathetic Welfare Officer admits, "It was obvious, of course [...] that the village was moribund in any case, a place given over almost wholly to the elderly, the fatuous, the physically inept" (*G* 244). *Greenoe* has become a community that is not a whole in itself, but is only a holding place for those who have nowhere else to go. If this is Brown's final view of community in the novel, then his project grows far more interesting: rather than documenting the ways in which a community operates, as he initially appears to be doing, he is instead writing about the desire for community at a time when the actuality of community is no longer possible. This explains the tendency towards reading and inwardness exhibited in the characters, their willingness to appear as types: all of the inhabitants of *Greenoe* are trying to create an imagined community, based largely on received notions from outwith the island, in the absence of a real one. This also, as in other works, reflects Brown's role (whether self-willed or outwardly imposed) of cultural ambassador: the novel is not ultimately intended for those who live in the real-life models for *Greenoe* and *Hellya*, but for a global readership that looks to the novel as a model of a community that they themselves do not possess. Brown's

goal thus becomes to illustrate the failures of community on a larger scale; it is not only the readers in the outside world who are displaced, but those within the works they read. The act of displacement from the community that these behaviours create is a necessary one, then, because there is finally no possibility in modern life of nondisplacement.

Greenvoe begins to make sense as a novel of displacement, rather than one of community, when it is read adjacently to Maurice Blanchot's conceptualisation of the disaster. For Blanchot the disaster is everpresent, unknowable, final and intangible, irreducible to anything else. He is here not interested with a specific, locatable disaster, but with a more general imminence. This somewhat abstracted notion of the disaster is representative of all that Brown sees to be the difficulties of modernity, of human coexistence at large. Whether the disaster in *Greenvoe* is read as literacy, Black Star, petty individuality, or any of the other markers of a collapsing society Brown inserts into the novel, is ultimately irrelevant. For Brown, the idea of community, the ideal community, is no longer a possibility; the panoply of voices in the novel is merely a way to give the reader different approaches to the same, changing and constant, disaster. As Blanchot writes:

There is no reaching the disaster. [...] We are on the edge of the disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future – that which is yet to come – if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. [...] The disaster is its imminence.³¹

Thus the disaster that is Black Star, the official death of the community insofar as it brings about the razing of crofts and the evacuation of the island's inhabitants, is a disaster that has in some sense already happened before the novel begins, and is also, even after its linear historical occurrence, still always imminent. It is for this reason that

the end of the novel is present throughout, even when the threat of physical destruction is barely apparent, and for this reason, also, that the specific nature of Black Star remains in doubt (critics have been firmly split on whether it is a North Sea oil concern, a nuclear weapons holding facility, or merely a vague apocalyptic premonition); the arrival of Black Star is nothing more than the arrival of a threat which has always been present, and which will exist no less after its arrival. For what is a “Black Star” if not, like Blanchot’s conceptualisation of disaster, “the night lacking darkness, but brightened by no light”?³² Black Star is at once “a piece of magic” and “nothing mysterious” (*G* 242), it “explode[s]” with “mystery and passion” (*G* 268), and yet is capable of freezing (*G* 275). It is, in short, far more a symbol than a construction operation. It is a disaster which always looms and which can never be permanently installed. And so the endpoint of the novel cannot be seen as “an outraged vision of evil and obscenity”, as Murray and Tait argue; nor can Black Star be read as alternately “Satan” or “death”³³ or even an embodiment of “the mechanical present”.³⁴ It is, instead, disaster as potentiality, as constant imminence. David S. Robb begins to approach this conclusion when he argues that Bold and Murray and Tait assume too much clarity of meaning: “A large part of the novel’s meaning may simply reside in its treatment of the community in the first five chapters”.³⁵ More than that, however, understanding *Greenvoe* through Blanchot’s conceptualisation of disaster reveals that the final chapter, concerning Black Star, is not substantially different in what it reveals about the nature of community from the first five chapters. For if, as Robb argues, Black Star “is simply a new guise for an ancient – indeed, timeless – feature of island life”,³⁶ then it must be seen as as much a part of the community as anything depicted in the preceding chapters.

Blanchot's conceptualisation of the disaster also goes far towards explaining Brown's distrust of the written word in *Greenvoe*, which initially strikes the reader as necessarily paradoxical: how can one such as Brown, whose life is wrapped up in the modern novel, use modernity and the novel as touchpoints for all that is wrong in the world? And yet, for Blanchot, the disaster is revealed in its inability to be written:

The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience – it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes. Which does not mean that the disaster, as a force of writing, is excluded from it, is beyond the pale of writing or extratextual.³⁷

Brown's disaster is the very de-scribing mentioned above. The writing of the disaster, in Blanchot's conceptualisation, is insufficient, in that the disaster by its nature cannot be written, yet Brown perhaps takes the idea further to argue that all writing is the writing of the disaster. Blanchot's text is an example of impossible writing; Brown's is occasionally more than that, an example of writing the impossible. If the disaster is everpresent, and if it is shown, as in *Greenvoe*, to be something that exists in writing – here in the form of the government official's de-scribing each house and each inhabitant before they are destroyed – then the writing of the disaster must be just as everpresent. If the entirety of *Greenvoe* contains the threat of Black Star, then the formational works referenced throughout the novel, Lawrence and Hopkins and the rest, also contain that imminent disaster. All writing is the writing of disaster. While Bold points to “a literature of rural decay behind *Greenvoe*”,³⁸ which is certainly apparent, the novel is concerned not only with rural decay, but with the decay of civilisation itself, or rather with the impossibility of an ideal civilisation, conceived by Brown as an amalgamation of Catholicism and Nordic practice and ritual. In condemning the shaping of society for the past few centuries, Brown is also in part condemning the written word, not for being

misleading so much as for having been worn out, for having exhausted itself without coming to a point at which it could influence humanity for the better. All of the books the characters read have not improved their lives, because the life of a community cannot be captured in prose. Instead, as Blanchot argues, “When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains (the fragmentary).”³⁹ In his fragmentary narratives, his accounts of lives which are not in themselves whole, Brown is illustrating the ways in which all writing becomes disaster writing; the novel can do no more than point towards the imminent disaster.

Brown’s approach to documenting community is best described as Nancy’s concept of the “singular voice of interruption”, which:

consists in *allowing to be said* something that no one – no individual, no representative – could ever say: a voice that could never be the voice of any subject, a speech that could never be the conviction of any understanding and that is merely the voice and the thought of community in the interruption of myth. At once *an* interrupted voice, and the voiceless interruption of every general or particular myth.⁴⁰

Brown’s voice in the novel is the voice of interruption, both in interrupting what could be interpreted as the voice of the community and in being interrupted itself. Or, as Nancy defines literary communism, “an articulation according to which there is no singularity but that exposed in common, and no community but that offered to the limit of singularities”.⁴¹ The very structure of the novel, a series of interrupting individual narratives which point to a community that cannot ever be reached, described, or made whole, indicates the impossibility of constructing a communal metanarrative. Brown cannot write a novel of community in which the whole community is written into one rubric, but can only document the interplay of individual voices in a situation, inherent in

modernity, in which the ideal community can be desired but neither defined or fulfilled. If literature is to a certain extent made redundant, if it is even viewed, as in *Greenvow*, as harmful to the lives of individual readers, it still can function, in the words of Kate Jenckes, to represent “an ongoing questioning of the possibility of such a collectivity: a questioning that at the same time implies its impossibility and its necessity”.⁴² *Greenvow* is thus fundamentally not a novel *of* community, but a novel which questions community, which seeks in the documentation of individual voices to explore the possibility of community, even as it recognises that community itself is impossible. Brown focuses on the way in which community continues to exist even when it is impossible, in the way that collective myths still function in people’s lives even when they have been disproved, in the way that community cannot function as such in the face of disaster, and yet does.

For Nancy, this literary communitarianism is closely linked to the role of myth. Myth, in this reading, is absolute community: “myth represents multiple existences as immanent to its own unique fiction, which gathers them together and gives them their common figure in its speech and as this speech”.⁴³ Myth is collective speech, it is the combination of individual voices into a whole. Myth is the way in which a community comes to terms with itself, in which it defines itself and places itself within a nonlinear continuity. It is the way in which the lives of disparate individuals can be voiced as a collective whole. From this standpoint, all of *Greenvow* is a conscious attempt at myth-formation, but Brown most clearly highlights the role of myth in the establishment of community when he writes of myth *qua* myth in his depiction of the Ancient Mystery of the Horsemen. Those who enact this ritual are consciously placing themselves into a defining myth: they are enacting something mythic in order that it can provide a

comprehensive structure for their individual lives. These miniature playlets make up the final word in each chapter, and both chart the village's recognition of its own imminent disaster and the possibility, however contrived, of continual renewal. Myth and horses are closely entwined in Brown's writing, both widely throughout the poetry and especially in stories such as "Seven Poets" from *The Sun's Net* and "The Corn and the Tares" from *The Masked Fisherman*, the latter of which explicitly concerns the construction of Edwin Muir's poem "One Foot in Eden", a significant influence on *Greenvoe*, as several critics have pointed out.

B. The Redemptive Myth

Muir's poetry is more explicitly concerned with apocalypse than *Greenvoe*. The disaster at hand – in "The Horses", a "seven days' war that put the world to sleep" – is not only imminent but present, yet Muir is also more confident in the possibility of renewal through the arrival of wild horses: "Our life is changed; their coming our beginning".⁴⁴ Muir's poem is focused on the redemptive power of myth and community – entwined here with concepts of sacrifice and an appeal to nature – a redemption most critics have seen echoed at the end of *Greenvoe*, when the ritual of the horsemen, which has ended with symbolic death in the fifth chapter, is reinstated by new participants. For Muir, this redemption is inherent in the natural world: only something outside the human community (understood both narrowly and broadly) can save it. The horses act almost as a divine intercession, the presence of the other serving to create a unified whole. This is a level of redemption which Brown does not believe possible; in *Greenvoe* such a

redemption is desired, but ultimately is revealed to be a unity which the world cannot sustain.

In the novel, the theme of redemption appears almost as an epilogue. Ten years after the island has been deserted, Mansie Anderson, the Lord of the Harvest in the ritual, returns to Hellya with six young men. The passage begins as a description of landscape, filled with anonymous figures:

The seven men on board [a rowing-boat] seemed anxious to make as little noise as possible; they whispered to one another; the oarsman dipped his blades with a slow lingering plangency. The sun has set but still the northern sky was a glow of crimson and saffron and jet, and the Atlantic caught the luminous riot with still greater brilliance. The boat smashed soundlessly through the stained glass of the sea. (*G* 275)

This is a conscious attempt at poetic myth-making on Brown's part. The language is filled with consonance and alliteration, the description of the landscape is at once highly specific to a given evening sunset and yet remains general. The figures in the landscape are referred to as "the oarsman", "a young man", "another man", "the old man" and so forth: the men are demarcated as individuals, separate from each other, but they could be any men, coming to the island of Hellya for any purpose. There is a brief nod to suspense here: the men could be government surveyors returning to the island to carry out more studies, or, as in *Beside the Ocean of Time*, hippies hoping for a new life. As much as they are specific characters in the novel, the men could be absolutely anyone, coming to the island for any purpose, and the reader is not meant to know, initially, who, or what, they are.

When the names of the characters are finally revealed, it becomes apparent that, with the exception of Mansie Anderson, who has been a relatively significant character throughout, they have all been previously present in the novel only as minor characters,

the children of the protagonists. They are named only in one paragraph, however, before Brown refers to them by their roles within the ritual: “the Harvester”, “the Lord of the Harvest”, “the Master Horseman”. Within this five page epilogue, then, Brown examines the lives of the (now former) inhabitants of Greenvoe in three different ways: as anonymous figures in a landscape, in which far greater attention is paid to the land than the figures; as named characters, demarcated as individuals in the way the reader expects from realist fiction; and as participants in ancient ritual, in which the role is paramount and the life of the individual fulfilling the role is completely subsumed within it. The ordering of these ways of looking at the members of a community fits into Brown’s oft-remarked belief in the primacy of ritual and myth. In “The Broken Heraldry”, Brown argues that pre-Reformation life was superior to modernity because “the temporal and the eternal, the story and the fable, were not divorced, as they came to be after Knox: they used the same language and imagery, so that the whole of life was illuminated”.⁴⁵ At the end of *Greenvoe*, Brown marks a return of sorts to this unity of myth and reality: not only do the characters exist on multiple planes, but their very language is used to both realist and mythic purposes. Within the ritual, the figure of the Harvester is killed, and as he assumes a symbolic death, he speaks four words: “Rain. Share. Yoke. Sun” (*G* 278). The other participants ascribe this speech to “the wind that moves in the dust”. Brown thus supplies, within the ritual, an echo of the first two planes of interpretation: the Harvester’s actual words belong to the reality of daily island life, to named individuals and their labour, while the surrounding men see the speech as part of the landscape, as an anonymous, unembodied voice. However, one of the Master Horsemen then offers a mythic reinterpretation: ““You will call it foolishness. Yet I will say what I heard. The

dust seemed to utter this word, *Resurrection*” (G 278). This final plane of interpretation, which in typical Brownian fashion combines the Christian and the pre-Christian, is the correct answer, the appropriate way to interpret the scene; as the novel ends:

The Lord of the Harvest raised his hands. ‘We have brought light and blessing to the kingdom of winter,’ he said, ‘however long it endures, that kingdom, a night or a season or a thousand ages. The word has been found. Now we will eat and drink together and be glad.’

The sun rose. The stones were warm. They broke the bread. (G 279)

This is perhaps the most remarked-on passage in the novel; for Bold, it “brings before the reader a world where renewal is always a possibility”,⁴⁶ for Murray and Murray, it is “the settlement and restoration of their faith”,⁴⁷ for Murray and Tait, it is “an affirmation of man and his relationship to nature, man and his determination in time”.⁴⁸ It is undoubtedly the first appearance in the novel of a successful community; the men speak with a unified voice, and are united under this one mythic rubric. The passage marks the emergence of the impossible community. As Schoene argues: “It is only in the aftermath of the disaster of Black Star that ritual and narrative, eternal truths and everyday reality [...] come back together to instigate a resurrection of the island and a revival of its identity”.⁴⁹

And yet this is an insufficient explanation of what occurs at the end of the novel. The everpresentness of disaster remains; the length of this new community’s endurance may very well be one night. This passage, although it is set in a specific time and place – “ten years after Hellya had been finally evacuated” (G 275) – is also set outside time; it is not a response to the disaster of Black Star, but the interruption by the timeless myth into a world which cannot sustain it. If Brown, at the end of the novel, is establishing a myth of community, it is a community which comes at the expense of the individual members

who constitute it. Myth is here represented as that which is wholly communal; as Nancy writes, paraphrasing Wagner and Levi-Strauss, “Myth arises only from a community and for it: they engender one another, infinitely and immediately”.⁵⁰ And yet, if *Greenvow* is a novel of the impossibility of community, then it must necessarily also be a novel of the impossibility of a naive return to myth. If the novel ends with a return to myth and the promise of the renewal of community that such a return promises, it is ultimately a hollow return, a temporary staving-off of disaster, or refusal to accept disaster, which changes nothing. The men who enact the ritual of the Horsemen do so in a spirit not only of renewal, but of nostalgia. The myth does not arise from, nor embody, a living community, but is instead enacted to preserve the artificial memory of a community which no longer exists. The passages throughout the novel depicting the ritual have been something set apart: they use an elevated language; they are written not as prose but as drama. Most importantly, as the ending point of each chapter, they are followed not with a return to the depiction of a living community, but with blank space. The ritual continues, not as an active or representative aspect of the life of the community, but rather as a coda to it. The ritual is one of death, for in every instance a figure is made to die symbolically, but until the final passage quoted above renewal is not even mentioned: the ritual is weighted to be a series of continual endings. The death of the community, the impossibility of its existence, is represented within this one myth which has sprung from it, a systematic rendering of individual death. Nancy argues that the West “has made of community an absolute End, *the* End”.⁵¹ Community, as represented here by communitarian ritual, in Brown is not only a teleological end, but an end in the sense of

an end of history. Nothing follows from this myth because nothing can follow the impossibility of community: myth is an end both as a desired goal and a finality.

For Nancy, myth is now necessarily interrupted from its communitarian meaning: “we know that we – our community, if it is one, our modern and postmodern humanity – have no relation to the myth of which we are speaking, even as we fulfil it or try to fulfil it. In a sense, for us all that remains of myth is its fulfilment or its will”.⁵² This is the phenomenon that Brown is documenting in his depiction of the ritual of the horsemen; the mythic ritual is fulfilled, it is acted out, but not as a part of the community, only as a remainder/reminder of the idea of community. To a certain extent, this recognition of the fallacy of myth must retroactively colour the rest of the novel, for in a certain manner all of *Greenvoe* is a conscious mythmaking. This is indicated primarily through language; a passage such as the opening of the second chapter gives an indication of Brown’s purpose:

In the endless bestiary of the weather the unicorns of cloud are littered far west in the Atlantic; the sun their sire, the sea their dame. Swiftly they hatch and flourish. They travel eastwards, a grey silent stamping herd. Their shining hooves beat over the Orkneys and on out into the North Sea. Sometimes it takes days for that migration to pass. But many are torn on the crags and hills, and spill their precious ichor on the farm-lands. Crofters wake to cornfields and pastures extravagantly jewelled. (G 37)

A passage such as this is not commonplace in a supposedly realist work, even one by an author better known for his poetry than his prose. Indeed, it repeats almost verbatim the lines from Brown’s 1965 poem “Weather Bestiary”, which begins: “RAIN / The unicorn melts through his prism.”⁵³ In the early criticism, such passages are alternately mocked or excused as poetic licence, yet this latter reading takes into no account Brown’s own verse which, while occasionally fanciful, is almost never this gaudy or extravagant. Such a

passage is not present in order to add a poetic tint to a realist novel, but to signify something substantially different, that all of what appears to be a work of realist fiction is as hyper-poetic, as steeped in the imagination, as a more recognisably elevated passage such as this. Brown here indicates a way to read the novel as conscious mythmaking, as something removed from reality by virtue of its being written. The novel is not then a realist fiction with echoes of myth, but a novel of myth grounded in reality; such is the impossibility of community that it can only be explored through this sort of myth-making.

C. The Individual Community

Brown's most interesting depiction of mythmaking, of the reformulation of an individual narrative into both a metanarrative that fulfils the demands both of fiction and community, comes in the story of Elizabeth McKee, whom Brown himself terms the one emergent, assertive character in the novel (*FI* 174). Mrs McKee's story is the one most easily read as a separate narrative, in part because she herself imagines her life as a readable narrative, one that acquires meaning only as it is judged from the outside. In seven passages, cumulatively making up almost one third of the novel, Mrs McKee is retold her life story by a board of (imaginary) inquisitors, and is made by them to answer to a series of charges, ranging from unwitting infidelity to unwitting murder. Mrs McKee is an outsider (from Edinburgh, and Brown's depictions of that city in this novel have more that is truly foreign about them than his depictions of the far East in *Time in a Red Coat*), judged by a court of outsiders, befriended in the novel only by an outsider (Johnny Singh, previously introduced in "The Seller of Silk Shirts" in *A Calendar of Love*), and is

largely unconcerned with the events of the village around her, yet she is also perhaps the central figure of the novel, the one in whom Brown puts the most emphasis in his explanation of the relation of the individual to this, and to any, community. For Murray and Tait, Mrs McKee is an example of the ways in which the Reformation has tormented the community: her two greatest charges in the assize with which she is occupied are that she has been in part responsible for the conversion of her niece Winnie to Catholicism and the growing alcoholism of her (Protestant) minister son. Murray and Tait argue that it is Mrs McKee's very outsider status which plagues her: "Product of city, not country, of industrial not agricultural Scotland, of the Reformation, this essentially good and well-meaning woman is plagued by monsters that attack no other inhabitant of Hellya".⁵⁴ Conversely, Schoene finds that "Some of the parallels between the woman and the island are so conspicuous that they eventually render Mrs McKee not only a mere symbol but in fact a startling likeness of the Orkney community".⁵⁵ Schoene's key example is that, after her increasing dementia and eventual coma, Mrs McKee makes a surprise recovery, a recovery he sees mirrored in the reworking of the ritual of the Horsemen at the novel's close. While this is a somewhat tenuous argument, Schoene makes a valid point in his tying of Mrs McKee to the larger community, even as she is something almost wholly separate from it. In his depiction of Mrs McKee, Brown reveals the ways in which individuals form their own communities, according to their own concerns, and the dangers inherent in that action.

Mrs McKee lives a life specifically concerned with memory and ritual. The assize which visits her four times a year to judge her past sins, is as much a ritual as that of the Horsemen, with its own particular and secret rules of conduct: "On every bright

and dark wind they came, her accusers, four times a year” (*G* 17). It is also explicitly a community based in individual memory. Mrs McKee “enjoyed the vivid resurrection of the past, however painful. There was a whole team of accusers, and it gave her pleasure to recognize their distinctive turns of phrase and the rhythms of their speaking (though some of them no doubt were very unpleasant dangerous persons indeed)” (*G* 18).

McKee’s project is thus extremely close to that of *The Skarf* and of Brown himself; she initially, at least, takes pleasure in the appearance of communal memory, in the recognition of individuals who have adopted a communal body without diminishing their own distinctive voices. In the absence of an engagement with the physical community around her, Mrs McKee has formulated one of her own, a community that is made up of individuals but acts as one. Brown’s focus here is not on an actual community, but one that is predominantly literary. This argument is in line with Nancy, who argues that: “literature offers the in-common (its only reason to be) as a completely buried memory, a memory also totally, invincibly, present”.⁵⁶ The complete presence of that which is also buried is the purpose of the *assize*, which is indeed readable as the presence of literature in individual life, as much as the other characters’ physical books. The *assize* is a way of provoking buried memory, of making it surface in ways that the individual memory-holder does not expect: “The *assize* lasted for many days and generally covered the same ground, though occasionally new material would be led that she had entirely forgotten about” (*G* 17). Yet Brown is more pessimistic than Nancy in this instance: for Brown, the “in-common” has been reduced to such an extent that it can only pertain to the given individual. What is in common in the *assize* is only so because the memories, the *assize*, the entire community of memory, springs from the mind of one person. The *assize* is,

along with the ritual of the Horsemen, the one true depiction of community in the novel: that it is both imaginary and destructive points significantly to the way in which Brown is using the novel to argue the impossibility of community in the present.

Mrs McKee's memory is not accidentally located in the form of a court. For Nancy, the approach of the individual to death, to "our own *final* horizon", is imbued with legal echoes; what humans do, according to Nancy, is to "compear before the 'world court'".⁵⁷ The compearance is a way in which two (or presumably more) individuals may answer to the same charge; in Brown, Mrs McKee appears alone, but also compears insofar as her selves spread out across time must answer together.⁵⁸ That appearance, or compearance, allows the life of an individual to be understood as a series of actions which must be accounted for, as accusations which must be answered. As Robb ably demonstrates, accusation "is one of the *leitmotifs* of the novel."⁵⁹ Mrs McKee, unlike the other characters, perhaps by dint of her outsider status, only accuses herself. The adoption of legalistic ritual becomes a form of self-accusation, as well as of renewal. Ritual is also present, however, in Johnny's visit to Mrs McKee, as a form of deliverance: "What is required in this room is exorcism. What is needed is some pure blessed deliberate ritual to rid this old woman of her ghosts" (G 94). And yet what Johnny offers her is not a ritual, but an acknowledgement of the outside, natural world, conversation about "the wild lupins in the island of Quoylay" and an attempt to prove that "the present world is full of such beautiful things" (G 94-5). Just as at the beginning of the novel, Brown is here arguing for a primacy of the natural order over the rituals that humans can impose on it. Mrs McKee is tormented by a community of memories to such an extent that she cannot engage in the physical world around her, where she might find a more

approving community. This, for Brown, is not an isolated incident, but the central element of individual life in the modern world. Mrs McKee is a central character, perhaps *the* central character, of the novel because she represents the impossibility of individual engagement in community: she turns away from the community which could be found on her doorstep in order to devise a community of her own imagining. And yet the community that is outside her is filled with individuals who, to a lesser extent, create their own adjudicators as well. When he is close to death by drowning, Samuel Whaness embarks on a pilgrim's progress (no doubt inspired by his previously-mentioned reading), a section which is both a pastiche of Bunyan and a condemnation of Protestant spirituality. He is surrounded not by judges but by shawled women and angel porters, and takes comfort in his belief that "by faith alone a man is justified" (G 220), but his self-devised torments as he approaches death – like that of Mrs McKee, one he is ultimately spared – isolate him from the actual community around him. Whaness and McKee both exist almost solely in their own imagined worlds, communities which are, perhaps, far richer, and certainly more familiar to them, than *Greenvoe* itself, but which also separate them out and make it impossible for them to exist as part of the community, and thus for the community to exist at all. These passages are an implicit condemnation of the turn towards inwardness which Brown sees as central to the modern world: this turn not only deprives the community of its members, but also brings those most inward closer to their own deaths. If community, as represented in the final ritual of the Horsemen, symbolises life, then individuality comes to signify death.

From these passages, it is easy to see how critics such as Craig develop the notion that *Greenvoe* is "directed not on the drive towards the modern world, but on the

transcendence of it [... incorporating a] denial of chronology and progress”.⁶⁰ And yet this interpretation is almost completely contrary to the point Brown is making in his treatment of Whaness and McKee: it is in transcending the world (whether ancient or modern), and in letting themselves live in a world made of memory, faith, ritual and imagination, that they drive themselves to death. It is in their need to explain themselves to a “world court” of their own devising that they separate themselves out from the real workings of the community. What Brown is interested in exploring is, according to Elsebet Jegstrup, an originally Kierkegaardian notion: “The elimination of the luminosity of singularity had reduced the human person to the abstraction of individuality and had reduced the ‘idea of community’ to the negative principle of sociality that rendered the question of existence irrelevant”.⁶¹ That is to say, Brown is not concerned with the transcendence of progress, but with the way in which progress makes it impossible for the individual to transcend himself. This marked change to abstract individuality is what drives the novel for Brown: a thriving, ideal community is made up of individuals to be sure, but in such a community the focus is on the whole, rather than turned inwards to an exploration of their own given individuality. Progress allows and encourages a focus on the abstract which removes the individual from an understanding of existence itself. For Brown, existence as it should be is understood through community, through a pre-Reformation understanding of the universe in which God, land and community are all understood as a totality.

For Kierkegaard, as interpreted by Jegstrup, progress in this sense perverts the “relation between the individual and community [which] is grounded externally in constructed justice”.⁶² Progress brings disorder to justice, which destroys the relationship

between the individual and community. This is the idea at which Brown is hinting in his portrayal of Mrs McKee as a slave to the assize; although her life can only be viewed in a legal setting, it is a perverse one, offering neither punishment nor forgiveness, unable to distinguish between levels of sin, unable to allow Mrs McKee to reintegrate herself within the community. Mrs McKee's life is validated according to a court of her own making, but it is crucially not a just court: the assize is a place of accusation, but not justice. Progress here has destroyed not only community, but a communal notion of justice. And yet, contrary to Craig, Brown does not advocate, or see as possible, a transcendence of progress or its effects. He instead documents these effects in order to demonstrate the way in which it is now impossible for an individual to transcend such matters; transcendence could have only come through the work of the whole community, a community –or an idea of community – which has, in Brown's understanding, necessarily been disrupted for centuries.

Greenvoe is thus the furthest thing imaginable from a denial of progress or an invitation to transcend it; it is instead a condemnation of progress and a calling to attention of the impossibility of the desired community. Mrs McKee's madness is relieved not in *Greenvoe*, but in Edinburgh, when she is returned to "her own city" (*G* 254). In *Greenvoe* she is subjected to "the dust and the raped skyline", to "the engines of destruction" and rejects the attentions of her surrounding neighbours (*G* 249). It is surprisingly in urban life that "Time built itself up again, not as an ancient storied house, but as a drift of butterflies. A delicate light lay upon her branching quickened veins; she was young again" (*G* 255). The engagement with time in a world ruled by progress is thus a fundamentally different one from that which would exist in a rural community. In

her return to Edinburgh, Mrs McKee moves past narrative into a world in which all events become simultaneous. Edinburgh, in works such as *Beside the Ocean of Time*, is depicted as something of an industrial hell, or at the very least a place which is destructive both to the individual and the possibility of community. Here, however, Edinburgh stands in for spring, rebirth and forgiveness. This is clearly not what one would expect in a work of true rural pastoral; it is only when the outsider is returned to that which is necessarily outside that she can make peace with herself and those around her. Edinburgh can do this work because it is there that the community of individuals can exist as such; necessarily a broken community, but nevertheless in some ways a far more functional one than that of Greenvoe. This acceptance of metropolitan communal identity has emerged over the past century as urban life becomes continually more dominant. The rural, agricultural community which forms Brown's ideal has been gradually replaced with a conception of community founded in the city. It is, after all, the city that is located as the basis of both community and philosophy in Nancy's conceptualisation: "the city [...] is the subject of philosophy, where philosophy is the production of their common *logos*".⁶³ Mrs McKee, at least, finds peace when she accepts progress and urbanity; for Brown, the modern individual is perhaps happiest as such, when the will to an ancient, ideally unified community is replaced with the acceptance of the plural community modernity demands. This passage reflects a peacemaking with modernity which is not present anywhere else in Brown's fiction, yet it is no less significant for that. In *Greenvoe*, the idea of the perfect community has been so corrupted that it is almost, but not entirely, no longer worth salvaging.

Mrs McKee is thus almost destroyed by her constructed narrative, by her engagement with a form of memory which is not communal but too individual, by her determination to examine the past as a series of accusations. She is given a parallel in the character of The Skarf, who is also concerned with constructing an answerable history, in this case not of himself but of the whole community. As is discussed above, The Skarf (known always by article and surname – his given name, Jeremias Jonathan, is not revealed until the very end of the novel, a revelation which, extending the novel's biblical parallels, shows him to be a sort of prophet) abandons his project at the point at which Black Star enters the novel. This abandonment constitutes an acceptance that the modern world will not support linear narratives of origin. Both The Skarf and Mrs McKee are depicted in the construction of (greater and lesser) explanatory metanarratives which are unsustainable in Brown's vision of modernity. For The Skarf, the purpose of this project is explicitly political: his vision of community reflects a greater Marxist paradigm. The Skarf's project is concerned with the anonymous more than the specific; while written by an individual, it is presented for the approval of the community at large. At the start of the novel, then, The Skarf's project is antithetical to Mrs McKee's: it is a communal narrative written for the benefit of the community, rather than an individual narrative constructed only for the benefit (or detriment) of the individual constructor. As the novel progresses, however, The Skarf's narrative becomes concerned with specificity. In his account of Thorvald Gormson (Harvest-Happy), The Skarf realises that ““We have passed beyond the age of anonymity now. Here at last is a man with a name”” (*G* 59). The narrative grows in specifics; at the appearance of Robert Stewart, the account grows more concerned with people of name than with the community, and in the final passage

in *The Skarf*'s narrative, only one man, Mansie Hellyaman, press-ganged in the nineteenth century, matters to the narrative, and only because he becomes a capitalist. It is progress itself that disallows *The Skarf*'s communal narrative; the events that shape the island can only be told, after a certain point in history, as individual narratives. It is at this point, in a sense, that Brown takes over from *The Skarf*; it is worth here noting that much of *The Skarf*'s narrative closely echoes, in tone and content, *An Orkney Tapestry*. The modern world can only be told in a series of individual narratives; the communal identity originally invoked can no longer be sustained.

The Skarf's failed narrative is almost directly opposed to Elizabeth Huberman's interpretation of it. For Huberman:

although *The Skarf* does not make the point, these cycles of sowing, harvesting, and baking, of living, dying, and giving birth, have been going on too long to be more than temporarily interrupted by a project conjured up by a fleshless, soulless Number. The community, as the movement and structure of the novel, as well as *The Skarf*'s history, have testified, is too solidly a whole to be disintegrated beyond recall, too timeless to be brought to an end.⁶⁴

And yet *The Skarf* is very clearly making a point, which is that these supposedly eternal cycles have been disrupted by capitalism and the rise of the individual. The final figure in his narrative, Hellyaman, is an opportunist and a man of violence. When he leaves the soldiering life, he is "caught up in the great dream of agriculture. New methods of farming were being tried out everywhere: enclosures, root crops, the renewal and sweetening of the land with clover. [...] And every year the banker sent him a statement that assured him he had more money than the year before" (*G* 162). Hellyaman's name is not accidental: the representative man of Hellya is now an individual who is concerned not with farming but with agriculture, not with the community but with personal gain. The community, encapsulated in the voice of *The Skarf*, has long been disintegrated, not

by the arrival of Black Star, but by the preceding centuries of the rise of individual dominance. The Skarf's history cannot explain the community, because there is no community left to explain, only the assemblage of individuals who form their own narratives, as born out most explicitly by Mrs McKee, but to a lesser extent by all of the inhabitants of the island. The historian, the writer of prose, has been made redundant. The Skarf's dream of "the Song of the Children of the Sun" (G 234) that will replace his history in the island's future remains a dream. For Brown, what is actually on the island in the present is nothing more than an assemblage of individuals who cannot be written into an overarching story.

For Brown, then, *Greenvoe* is set up to dispute the possibility of the very sort of community towards which it points (and which hopeful critics have often found within), a community of "a single interwoven identity".⁶⁵ His *Greenvoe* is a place of inwardness and accusations, of individual fantasies and collective disputes. To a certain extent, the novel must be read as an account of what has gone wrong with modernity, and how it has happened. The novel begins with a depiction of what appears to be a vibrant, interwoven community, only to reveal it as inwardly corrupt, hoping for redemption but not assured of it. For Brown, what a community should be can only be revealed by what it has failed to be. In "The Cinquefoil", published not long after *Greenvoe*, Brown explicitly outlines the ideal community:

A community maintains itself, ensures a continuance and an identity, through such things as the shop, the kirk, the stories told in smithy and tailor-shop, the ploughing match, agricultural show, harvest home, the graveyard where all its dead are gathered. (It is the same with all communities – city or island – but the working-out of the ethos of a community is best seen in microcosm, as in the island of Selskay.) Most of all the community ensures its continuance by the coming together of man and woman. [...] The place where the community lives is important, of course, in perpetuating its identity.⁶⁶

This prescriptive passage is what is in keeping with the remnants of community displayed in *Greenvoe*, most especially in the first chapter. The community, as it is initially portrayed, comes together in the combination of land and commerce, in conversation and silence. The community is a combination of the man-made (the shop), the divine (the kirk) and the landscape. In their long-standing ties to each other and to the land, the inhabitants of Hellya have the outward appearance of community; what they lack is what Brown terms “Love”:

all loves and affections become meaningful only in relation to Love itself. The love of a young man and girl in a small island is cluttered always with jealousy, lewdness, gossipings in the village store. But the mystics insist that Love itself ‘moves the stars’. They say that, in spite of the terror and pain inseparable from it, ‘all shall be well’ – in the isolate soul, and in the island, and in the universe. The meanest one in the community feels this occasionally; he could not suffer the awful weight of time and chance and mortality if he didn’t; a sweetness and a longing are infused into him, a caring for something or someone outside his shuttered self.⁶⁷

In his appropriation of a Catholic mystical tradition, most especially in this passage the works of Julian of Norwich, to explain the secular community, Brown reveals that the ultimate failing in *Greenvoe*, that which dooms the islanders, is not only a lack of love, but of faith. For a notably religious writer, a Catholic convert since 1961, *Greenvoe* is remarkable for the lack of attention paid to religion. The Whaness family is devout in their way, and Mrs McKee’s narrative is in part concerned with the theological training of her son Simon, the island’s minister, but, with the exception of Ivan Westray’s oft-mentioned book of sermons *On Love Carnal and Divine*, the island appears to exist on a largely secular plane: the faith of individuals never leads towards a community of faith. The closest Brown comes to a statement of the centrality of religious faith to community is in the final ritual of the Horsemen, in which the “resurrection” at hand is explicitly

Eucharistic. As Schoene argues: “In startling imitation of the Incarnation of Christ, the Fable of Orkney enters the narrative of the Story here, revealing the entwinement of the ordinary with the eternal and divine”.⁶⁸ But Schoene’s interpretation is here somewhat misleading, for while the ritual is everpresent in the novel, it is never “ordinary”, especially at the end, where all that is ordinary in the community has departed. The ritual exists to fill the vacuum created by the departure of the community as such. Even as Brown depicts the potential return of the “eternal and divine” to the island, he ensures that such a return can only occur in the absence of the ordinary community. God is the central aporia of the text, the absent metanarrative which, in its very absence, ensures the failure of all other, smaller metanarratives. Again returning to the condemnation of the Reformation in “The Broken Heraldry”, a disruption of faith which gives rise not only to Calvinism, but implicitly to secularism, Brown is depicting in *Greenvoe* what happens to a community in which the central organising principle of a god has been abandoned. In his essay on Rackwick in *An Orkney Tapestry*, Brown writes of how, through the observance of Catholic ritual, “into the crofter’s sackcloth the life of Christ wove richness and beauty” (*OT* 36), while Calvinism is associated with a secular belief in fate (*OT* 48). In giving themselves up to fate – another potential explanation of that for which Black Star is a symbol – the islanders abandon the (Catholic) metanarrative which could have sustained the community.

If, as has been extensively argued above, *Greenvoe* can be read as essentially a novel of despair, it is the despair of the possibility of community after the death of God. There is, all the same, a fictive, or impossible, community which is depicted in the novel, and it is, perhaps not surprisingly, the very same community which Nancy sees (quite

favourably) as arising in the absence of God, a community structured around common plurality. Greenvoe is an example of what Nancy's terms a "divine [place] without gods".⁶⁹ For Nancy, the community is centred on the plurality of Being, of the difference between the singular which constitutes Being, and which is grounded in a specifically non-Christian practice of 'love':

this love is not some possible mode of relation; it designates relation itself at the heart of Being – in lieu of and in the place of Being – and designates this relation, of one to another, as the infinite relation of the same to the same as originally other than itself. [...] It is a matter of wondering about the 'meaning' (or 'desire') of a thinking or culture that gives itself a foundation the very expression of which denotes impossibility, and of wondering how and to what extent the 'madness' of this love could expose the incommensurability of the very constitution of the 'self' and the 'other,' of the 'self' in the 'other.'⁷⁰

This is a remarkable paragraph, for Nancy insists that this love, when removed from its conceptualised Judeo-Christian history, is the way in which the relation of the self to Being, and the relation of the self to the other, is best understood, and simultaneously insists that, so entwined is the concept of love with Judeo-Christian notions, that it can only denote an impossibility of relation. The contradiction here is the same with which Brown is struggling, although to opposite ends: through Judeo-Christian history and practice, humanity has been given a guideline of what it is a community should be, of how it is that a self relates to others, to the Other, to otherness itself, and yet that system of relations is necessarily impossible. It is not enough, as Nancy implicitly admits, merely to state that these concepts can be utilised free of their previous significations, and yet there is no other language with which to discuss the nature of relation. For Nancy, God, or the gods, or the divine, "formed the common name or place [...] of every question, every exigency of thought".⁷¹ Given the absence of God (or even, in terms which would be more permissible to Brown, the impossibility of recreating the original

relationship between humanity and the divine, which was severed at the Reformation), all of that which was understood through God, including self, others, community and love, is now understood only as fragments. These fragments cannot be fully understood in isolation, but only through Being-with, through co-existence, with other fragmentary natures. And yet it is still impossible to speak of these things without implicitly referring back to an earlier, unified, way of looking at the world and at the divine. This is a key concern of *Greenvow*: the ritual at the end of the novel can, perhaps, only refer directly to the divine because it has been taken out of the world as such, because the concerns of self, otherness, community and so on have been forcibly removed by Operation Black Star, which here has become a quite literal *deus ex machina*, a way in which the divine can be reinstated perhaps only at the expense of those to whom it would relate. Brown's community is one which yearns to transcend its own fragmentary nature, and cannot, until such a time as all of the fragments themselves have been further fragmented to the level of the individual without others.

In Nancy's thought, this fragmentary nature revealed in, or constitutive of, community, is the way in which Being can best be understood, not as *Dasein* but as *Mitsein*. In Nancy's extrapolation of Heidegger *Mitsein* becomes absolutely central to any understanding of Being: Being is revealed as meaning, and that meaning is in turn revealed as the sharing of Being.⁷² At the level of the human, Being consists in being-in-common, that is, in the formation, however expressed, of community. But community in this sense cannot be understood as a single entity, as the interwoven whole of Brown's idealised pre-Reformation community would be understood, but as linked, but not unified, singulars. The fragmentation at the heart of any understanding of community is

thus a necessary way of understanding Being for Nancy, but crucially, as shown in the first passage quoted above, does not yield to a rude collective of egos, but to a coexistence of singulars. While Nancy is explicitly writing on the demise of communism, he is, in his own way, here advancing a utopian understanding of community: “Because not being able to say ‘we’ is what plunges every ‘I,’ whether individual or collective, into the insanity where he cannot say ‘I’ either. To want to say ‘we’ is not at all sentimental, not at all familial or ‘communitarian.’ It is existence reclaiming its due or its condition: coexistence.”⁷³ This “we”-ness is an essential condition of human existence which is fulfilled by community, even when community has been rendered impossible. And it is this notion of an essential coexistential element of human life which finally unites Brown and Nancy, as centrally different as their overall claims about the nature of community and of the relation of self to others, to the divine and to the world, can be. Both posit that although the community is impossible, although it is likely, or at least possible, that the fragmented individuals will move into a state of solitary ego, it is only in coexistence that difference can be fully revealed. This begins to explain the bare “types” who populate *Greenvow*: they can only be revealed as such because they co-exist within a cobbled-together community, one which does not reflect the unified whole to which Brown would advocate a return and which Nancy would castigate as sentimental, but which nevertheless represents a peculiarly modern approach to the question of being within a community.

A further unification of perspective can be seen in Nancy’s work with Lacoue-Labarthe on the literary fragment. The fragment, in the early German romanticism to which they refer, “designates a presentation that does not pretend to be exhaustive and

that corresponds to the no doubt properly modern idea that the incomplete can, and even must, be published [...] the fragment functions simultaneously as a remainder of individuality *and* as individuality".⁷⁴ As explained by Blanchot, the fragment does not exclude or annul the whole, but instead expands it, surpasses it.⁷⁵ The fragment in literature is, then, a way to explore the whole while remaining at the level of the individual. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's focus here is on fragments clearly identified as such, but it is possible to interpret *Greenvoe* as, to a certain extent, a fragmentary novel. Rather than reading the novel as a collection of short stories which have been combined to create a novelistic effect, as many of the early reviewers did, it is possible to read it as a collection of fragments, a series of passages which focus on the individual, and are to a certain extent necessarily incomplete in themselves, but which through their juxtaposition, and by the foregrounding of their very fragmentary nature, point towards a whole. The lives Brown portrays cannot be understood in isolation, but simultaneously can only be portrayed in isolation. There is no way to point at the whole except by pointing at its constitutive points, and yet those fragments do not necessarily cohere. Within *Greenvoe*, it is in the spaces between the distinct fragments that the community appears, in the switch between forms, between narrators. The whole cannot be documented as the whole, but in the documentation of fragments something of the whole can perhaps be salvaged.

Greenvoe thus points to a radical new understanding of community. To say that it is wholly successful as a novel *qua* novel is clearly impossible,⁷⁶ but Brown himself has anticipated this failure in his depiction of the lives ruined by the unified worlds presented within fiction (and within texts at large). The novel as a form can no longer be used to

depict a community, or even a whole and independent individual, but can only, in fragments, both portray what has been lost within modernity and what is still present. Indeed, the remainder of Brown's novels can also be seen as an attempt to assemble fragments of individual lives that point towards an impossible whole. There is, then, a tremendous tension in *Greenvoe*: the fragments that constitute it point both towards disaster and towards a new understanding of community, seemingly entirely disparate notions of the future. In his later writings, Brown attempts to find ways to resolve this tension: myth, sacrifice and poetry all serve to point beyond a disrupted community and towards an eternal unity which, even if it cannot be captured or enacted upon, nevertheless exists as promise. Here, however, the community is left as impossible: the disaster as forever imminent and always present. *Greenvoe* is best understood not as a novel of the Orkneys at all, then, but as an expression of modern despair, a despair which in his age Brown would attempt to mollify, but here presents only as crisis. It is a novel which cannot, by virtue of its content, cohere: it is a system of fragments which point towards the forever impossible. *Greenvoe* represents the novel as fragment, as everything and nothing, and as such it also becomes the novel of modern community, impossible and ever-present.

NOTES

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, The Inoperative Community, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 15.

² William Corlett, Community Without Unity: A Politics of Derridean Extravagance (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989) 17.

³ Susan Love Brown, "Community as Cultural Critique," Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective, ed. Brown (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) 153.

⁴ Robert M. Dainotto, Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000) 23.

⁵ David Annwn, "'The Binding Breath': Island and Community in the Poetry of George Mackay Brown," Poetry in the British Isles: Non-Metropolitan Perspectives, ed. Hans-Werner Ludwig and Lothar Fietz (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995) 305.

⁶ Annwn 285.

⁷ Hart 384.

⁸ Nancy, Inoperative Community 3.

⁹ Schoene 170.

¹⁰ *Ten Modern Scottish Novels*, in which their piece appears, was with the exception of Alan Bold's short biography, the first significant critical discussion of *Greenvoe* outside of its original reviews, and has contributed greatly to the novel's recent rise in stature and popularity.

¹¹ Derek Stanford, "One Summer Week," Scotsman 27 May 1972, sec. 2: 3. Stanford's review is especially interesting as a mis-reading of the novel; not only does he see it as a conscious pastiche of Thomas on Brown's part, and spend the bulk of the review denoting parallels and differences, but he also writes at some length about the novel's time structure, believing that it straightforwardly depicts a week in the life. As the novel cannot work as a straightforwardly realist fiction, it is not surprising that his review is so dismissive; he is at least more gracious in his criticism than the *Times*, which dismissed *Greenvoe* in 128 words.

¹² Michael Scott-Moncrieff, "The Orcadian Recorder," Glasgow Herald 27 May 1972, sec. 2: 2.

¹³ Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973) 4.

¹⁴ Murray and Tait 150-1.

¹⁵ Craig, Modern Scottish Novel 162.

¹⁶ D.H. Lawrence, The Complete Short Stories, vol. 2 (London: Heinemann, 1961) 545.

¹⁷ Murray and Tait 166.

¹⁸ As Alan Bold points out, both the daily routine of Barclay and his preoccupations (Catholicism, Norse history) mirror Brown's to such an extent that the story may be seen as semi-autobiographical. Bold 64.

¹⁹ George Mackay Brown, A Time to Keep and Other Stories (1969; London: John Murray, 2000) 159.

²⁰ Neil Roberts, "George Mackay Brown," Cambridge Quarterly 6.2 1973: 181.

²¹ Elaine Glover, "Recent Fiction and..." Stand 14.2 1973: 38.

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- ²² Ali Smith, introduction, Greenvoe, by George Mackay Brown (1972; Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004) vii.
- ²³ Schoene 171.
- ²⁴ Tom Scott, "Orkney as Pairt O an Eternal Mood," Chapman 60 April 1990: 33.
- ²⁵ George Mackay Brown, "The Broken Heraldry," Memoirs of a Modern Scotland, ed. Karl Miller (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) 144.
- ²⁶ Brown, "The Broken Heraldry" 145.
- ²⁷ Schoene 172.
- ²⁸ Brown, "The Broken Heraldry" 144.
- ²⁹ Brown, "The Broken Heraldry" 146.
- ³⁰ Stryck "End of Community" 203.
- ³¹ Maurice Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster, trans. Ann Smock, new ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 1.
- ³² Blanchot 2.
- ³³ Murray and Tait 149, 151.
- ³⁴ Bold 93.
- ³⁵ David S. Robb, "Greenvoe: A Poet's Novel," Scottish Literary Journal 19.1 May 1992: 47.
- ³⁶ Robb 50.
- ³⁷ Blanchot 7.
- ³⁸ Bold 99.
- ³⁹ Blanchot 33.
- ⁴⁰ Nancy, Inoperative Community 80. Italics in original.
- ⁴¹ Nancy, Inoperative Community 80.
- ⁴² Kate Jenckes, "The Work of Literature and the Unworking of Community or Writing in Eltit's *Lumpérica*," CR: The New Centennial Review 3.1 Spring 2003: 69.
- ⁴³ Nancy, Inoperative Community 57.
- ⁴⁴ Edwin Muir, An Autobiography (1954; Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1990) 294-5.
- ⁴⁵ Brown, "The Broken Heraldry" 145.
- ⁴⁶ Bold 94.
- ⁴⁷ Murray and Murray 138.
- ⁴⁸ Murray and Tait 151.
- ⁴⁹ Schoene 185.
- ⁵⁰ Nancy, Inoperative Community 50.
- ⁵¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Comparution/The Compearance: From the Existence of "Communism" to the Community of Existence," trans. Tracy B. Strong, Political Theory 20.3 Aug. 1992: 374.
- ⁵² Nancy, Inoperative Community 52.
- ⁵³ Brown, Collected Poems 50.
- ⁵⁴ Murray and Tait 163,
- ⁵⁵ Schoene 179.
- ⁵⁶ Nancy, "La Comparution" 386.
- ⁵⁷ Nancy, "La Comparution" 372. It is notable for the purposes of this parallel that the word "compear", which Strong uses to translate "comparution", is derived from Scottish law.

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- ⁵⁸ The assize is indeed tied to Simon McKee's episodes of drunkenness (*G* 18), but as the fantasy is solely Mrs McKee's, it is only her self which must answer to the court.
- ⁵⁹ Robb 51.
- ⁶⁰ Craig, Out of History 58-9.
- ⁶¹ Elsebet Jegstrup, "A Questioning of Justice: Kierkegaard, the Postmodern Critique and Political Theory," Political Theory 23.3 Aug. 1995: 426.
- ⁶² Jegstrup 434.
- ⁶³ Nancy, Being Singular Plural 22.
- ⁶⁴ Elizabeth Huberman, "Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe*: Rediscovering a Novel of the Orkneys," Critique 19.2 1977: 41. Here, as in her analysis of *Magnus*, Huberman's interpretation of the novel is especially worth examining for its inability to associate the novel with anything other than itself and to take the works of Brown purely at face value.
- ⁶⁵ Brown, "Broken Heraldry" 145.
- ⁶⁶ George Mackay Brown, Hawkfall and Other Stories (1974; Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004) 97.
- ⁶⁷ Brown, Hawkfall 99.
- ⁶⁸ Schoene 185.
- ⁶⁹ Nancy, Inoperative Community 150.
- ⁷⁰ Nancy, Being Singular Plural 79-80.
- ⁷¹ Nancy, Inoperative Community 112.
- ⁷² Nancy, Being Singular Plural 2.
- ⁷³ Nancy, Being Singular Plural 42.
- ⁷⁴ Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism, 1978, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 42-3.
- ⁷⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 57.
- ⁷⁶ While novel cannot be read as adhering to a traditional unity, it quite possibly fits Denis Hollier's definition of the novel as "the story of an individual who is not integrated into collective experience". Denis Hollier, Absent without Leave: French Literature Under the Threat of War, 1993, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997) 3. While Hollier's definition and its implications for a work such as *Greenvoe* cannot be fully taken into account in this context, it would be worth considering *Greenvoe*'s very incoherence as representative of the modern novel itself.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: The Question of Community

As has been demonstrated in the preceding chapters, the tension or relationship between individuals and community forms the theoretical core of Brown's longer works of fiction. The nature of community surfaces as a dominant theme in his nonfiction as well. For Brown, community is the medium through which individuals connect with their history; it is not only that, as he argues in *An Orkney Tapestry*, a "community like Orkney dare not cut itself off from its roots and sources" (OT 29), but that community is the very way in which those roots and sources are maintained. A community in its ideal form is not only a gathering of individuals, but also the way in which those individuals can come to a coherent understanding of themselves. At the same time, Brown uses the idea of this ideal community to express not only historical understanding, but also geographical situation, racial homogeneity, and religious unification. Contrary to these holistic notions of what community represents, however, Brown also uses the term to explore the ways in which a community, both in presence and absence, can be used to reveal individual difference. In his writings on community Brown continually questions the divide between the ideal and the actual, between community as a defining concept and as a lived experience. As will be shown below, Brown looks at the idea of community in three ways: he examines the geographico-historical or "real" community; he posits community as an abstract ideal which exists in the revelation of difference; and finally he reveals community, in a Heideggerian sense, as the turning, or the way that truth is unconcealed.

This first sense of community is the only one which the majority of his critics have recognised. Indeed, Maggie Fergusson's recent biography of Brown can be seen to represent the tone of Brown's critical appraisal: she situates her account of Brown's childhood and upbringing in the context of the Orkneys as "'a place of vision' which sustained him in his writing for the rest of his life".¹ From this critical perspective, it is not only important that Brown documents a real community, but that to a certain extent he himself embodies it. It is in the latter two senses of community detailed above that the extent of Brown's philosophical engagement with the very idea of community becomes apparent, however. This willingness to explore a concept so fully is what marks Brown as a far more self-conscious writer than he is usually understood to be; his attempt to think about the limits of community and to examine what remains when the ideal fails is in many ways a thoroughly modern trope. This focus on community, often to the exclusion of all other themes, has also been what has prevented Brown from being thought of as more than a regional writer; he is often dismissed as focusing on "the alleged primal virtues of the unsophisticated peasantry".² The contemporary criticism of Brown often follows from the early critiques of Robert Burns and James Hogg: his status as poet of place allows readers to see his work as pertaining only to that which is local to him. Brown himself occasionally acquiesced in this view, appearing in interviews as a man "as rooted in the community as any writer could be"³ or as "the most unassuming of Orcadian bards".⁴ It is this very engagement with community which ultimately marks Brown out as a philosophical writer, however, one who is rigorously critical of the ways in which individuals and groups approach self-understanding. It is through his life-long

exploration of community that Brown comes to address not only life as it is lived in the contemporary Orkneys, but the nature of Being itself.

A. Community as Difference, as Dwelling and as Myth

The idea of community has become one of the dominant strands of modern philosophical thought, notably for the purposes of this thesis in those works of Nancy and Blanchot which in many ways follow on from a Heideggerian ontology. An understanding of community is central to any understanding of contemporary metaphysics, for community is perhaps best understood both as Being and as the answer to Being. This is a necessarily bold statement, and in order to understand it we need first to examine the relationship between beings and Being as Heidegger, among others, has outlined it.⁵ In his pivotal, and extremely condensed, essay, “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics”, Heidegger argues firstly that “The difference between beings and Being is the area within which metaphysics, Western thinking in its entire nature, can be what it is”.⁶ That is to say, following from Hegel, Being is itself, as itself, the absolute concept or the essential truth of what it is to which beings pertain. Being is that to which beings belong. This relation between beings and Being is as old as metaphysics itself, and for the purposes of this chapter cannot be extensively explored. What is crucial in this quotation, however, is that Heidegger designates not relation but difference as the central area of metaphysical exploration with which he is concerned. “In order to think of the difference as such,” Heidegger writes, “we do not make it disappear; rather, we follow it to its essential origin”.⁷ Being as being and Being as beings must be thought of in regards to an originary difference. Difference, then, is used

to explain, in the phrase of Thomas Sheehan, “the fact that human existence and the human world are always nonimmediate and not self-coincident”.⁸

Heidegger’s focus here is on the way in which this difference is originary in terms of the individual, but recent years have seen a movement to use Heidegger’s starting principles as a way of thinking about the collective. For both Brown and recent French theorists from Georges Bataille onwards, community, whether thought of in terms of *Mitsein* or *Gemeinschaft* – an important distinction which will be addressed below – is the way in which this originary difference is revealed. For Bataille, Being “is never simple, and if it has a lasting unity, it only possesses it when imperfect: it is undermined by its profound inner division”.⁹ What Bataille is pointing to here is a certain rupture at the heart of Being, an impossibility of wholeness. Bataille’s solution, as it were, is to focus on inner experience which is only permitted through community, an experience, as Nancy writes, that “is in no way ‘interior’ or ‘subjective,’ but is indissociable from the experience of this relation to an incommensurable outside”.¹⁰ What wholeness there is is revealed through an understanding of division and difference; the only approach to the totality of being is through its divided parts and through the experience of the outside-of-self which community furnishes.

Thus although Heidegger sees difference as an explanatory path towards identity, rather than to Being as such, within his works there is a pointing towards difference and dividedness as constitutive of Being itself. Nancy, following from Bataille, neatly connects this apparent division at the centre of Being to community:

This rupture (analogous, if not identical, to Heidegger’s distinction between the ontical and the ontological) defines a *relation* to the absolute, imposing on the absolute a relation *to* its own Being instead of making this Being immanent to the absolute totality of beings. And so, Being “itself” comes to be defined as

relational, as non-absoluteness, and, if you will – in any case this is what I am trying to argue – *as community*.¹¹

This shift from Being to community is the key move in all of Nancy's work. It is predicated on Heidegger's use of *Mitsein*, or being-with, Heidegger's "answer to the question of the 'who' of everyday Dasein".¹² Being-with is a way for *Dasein* to understand itself in terms of what is already present ("ready-to-hand") within the world. This provokes the question of community: it would initially appear that *Mitsein* is fulfilled through a literal gathering of others. Yet this is not the case for Heidegger: "even if the particular factical Dasein does *not* turn to Others, and supposes that it has no need of them or manages to get along without them, it *is* in the way of Being-with".¹³ Thus in *Being and Time* Being-with is not presented as community, but as an essential statement of what *Dasein* is: Being-with is not ultimately predicated on the presence of others, but is one of the ways in which *Dasein* is revealed. Specifically, Heidegger is here focusing on the way in which *Dasein* is revealed as everydayness, yet this everydayness is outside of nature and thus not social, nor, perhaps, communitarian. As Michael Haar writes: "[Everydayness] is founded upon a Being-with-others which existentially determines Dasein, even if no Other is in fact present-at-hand".¹⁴ This *Mitsein*, insofar as it reveals *Dasein*, does not require something to exist in relation to its "with": being-with requires no object, only the possibility of an object. Heidegger is using being-with to explain the individual *Dasein*, yet as Christopher Fynsk points out, this being-with is not autonomous. Being-with an Other is not the same as Being-with (or towards) oneself, but they exist in necessary relation. "Dasein's relation to itself and its relation to the Other are not the same relation (or a relation of sameness), but nor can they be kept separate from one another – otherwise there could be no communication of

difference.”¹⁵ Heidegger thus begins to invent a new language of community, and the ways in which community can simultaneously reveal both the self and others, pointing towards the sort of self-realisation pointed to by Bataille as “inner experience”, but draws short at the last moment in order to focus only on the individual *Dasein*. As Simon Critchley argues, Nancy’s task is thus to rewrite *Being and Time* in such a way that *Mitsein* is the essential originary concept: the pre-eminent focus of the work is on Heidegger’s “phenomenology of everyday life, the sheer banality of our contact (*cotoîment*) with the world and with others”.¹⁶ In order to accomplish this, Nancy proposes a reading of *Mitsein* in which Being-with is revealed as community.

Nancy begins his analysis with a questioning of “the breakdown in community that supposedly engendered the modern era”.¹⁷ This is a theme with which Brown, alongside a great many other writers typically labelled “rural” or “parochial”, is consistently involved, simultaneously looking back to “a time, 150 years ago, when life was dangerous and the language rich, and the community was invested with a kind of ceremony” (*FI* 166-7), and examining a vision of the present which is predicated on a necessary lack of such a community. Nancy sees this sort of reflection on the lost community as a constant in human life, whether the lost community at hand be Greek, Roman or Christian: “always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy and autonomy”.¹⁸ The community, viewed as something already lost, is thus both the collective whole of a given group of people, encompassing all elements of their lives, and also the way in which they come to

self-realisation. For a writer like Brown, this form of community is already mythic, and the task of the individual writer is to relate the mythic to the actual:

it was under these ordinary skies that the hunt, the battle, the voyage, the settlement, the triumph and defeat and reconciliation, take place; and the men and women and children of the islands (and everywhere) are the eternal actors. It is the writer's task to relate the legend (what Edwin Muir called 'the fable') to this age of television, uranium, and planet-flight.¹⁹

In an autobiographical essay such as this, ostensibly designed to reveal his own origins as an individual writer, Brown makes explicit what Nancy calls an essentially Christian trope: ideal community once existed, but now can only be remembered. Tracing the history of this trope back through the history of the West, Nancy argues that there has never been an age in which humans were not looking back to a more ideal community, rather than celebrating that in which they lived. Nancy goes on to argue that "the thought of community or the desire of it might well be nothing other than a belated invention that tried to respond to the harsh reality of modern experience", in this case, for Nancy, the absence of the divine.²⁰

For many contemporary theorists, these notions of community are necessarily Nietzschean. As Derrida writes: "These thoughts invent themselves by countersigning [...] to the event signed 'Nietzsche'. [...] They belong without belonging to the untimely time of Nietzsche."²¹ The contradictions in this citation make clear the paradoxes which Nancy is attempting to explicate: community itself must be understood as belonging without belonging and as existing in time while remaining untimely. If one is not to posit "community" as part of a possibly mythic past, then its paradoxical nature must be made explicit. Derrida points to the way that Nietzsche "sometimes says 'I' and sometimes 'we'. The signatory of the precursory discourses addressed to *you* is sometimes me,

sometimes us.”²² What interests Derrida in this reading of Nietzsche is the way in which the impossible community refers to both the solitary individual and the collective at the same time: it is always both inclusive and exclusive. Tracing this idea back as far as Nietzsche reveals that the idea of the impossible community is closely tied both to modernity and to the death of God, as Nancy also attests. As Fynsk writes, Nancy’s argument is built on both Bataille and Nietzsche, insofar as he argues that: “part of the devastation wrought by the technical organization of advanced capitalist societies [...] lies in the isolation of the individual in its very death”.²³ The dissolution of community must in part be understood as an effect of modern conceptions of self and society. However, as Nancy adds, we must also be suspicious of this idea of a “lost” community which modernity has eradicated: “at every moment in its history, the Occident has given itself over to the nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared”.²⁴ The impossibility of community must thus be understood as both an effect of modernity and as a constant uniquely outside of time.

If the desire for a “lost” community is revealed as a constant in human experience, then such nostalgic idealism is necessarily called into question. For Nancy (again, virtually paraphrasing Bataille), community must be understood as something else, something active in the present, specifically as the way in which the individual’s existence outside himself is revealed. “Community means [...] that there is no singular being without another singular being.”²⁵ Community is thus the way in which the self relates to both others and itself. This initially appears to be the farthest possible point from Brown’s conceptualisation of community, in which the whole relates to itself as a whole. And yet, in a rather surprising passage in his autobiography, Brown introduces

the community as the way in which individual difference is necessarily revealed: “We put on masks when we go out of our houses into the community. Communal life is complex: we have a different mask for everyone we encounter” (*FI* 17). This is a very different conceptualisation of community from those passages of Brown cited above: here Brown argues that community not only reveals individual difference, but also creates it. A singular being, through communication with another singular being, creates itself anew. Community, in this image of Brown’s, is certainly the way in which the self is revealed to itself, but this revealing is not one of some sort of inner truth, but instead reveals the self only insofar as the self relates to others. There is a certain circularity at work here, then, for in Brown’s conception community creates or reveals that which can only be seen within a community. The way an individual perceives herself and the way that individual is perceived by others are both functions of community. Along similar lines to Bataille and Nancy, then, Brown’s conception of individual being is predicated on its revealing through community. Community thus cannot be thought of as a past moment, but as something at the very heart of modern life and any modern understanding of self.

This notion of “masks” and, above, of “actors” raises a troubling question: in Brown’s conceptualisation of community, how much communal behaviour can be said to be organic or originary, and how much is artificially created? Brown’s *Letters from Hamnavoe*, a collection of early *Orcadian* columns centred on community news, is filled with injunctions against transistor radios and “The Menace of Cars”; his dominant theme in the column is a mourning of all that modernity (as expressed through physical emblems) has stripped from the community and the ways in which technology has taken from the community that which was essential to its survival. The community Brown

reveals is one which is in part predicated on its physical nature: he writes with dismay, for instance, on the replacement of flagstones with concrete, in hopes that “the Stromness members of the Heritage Society will keep an eye firmly on the situation”.²⁶ The columns initially appear to support the widespread view of Brown as a somewhat curmudgeonly preserver of past ways of living, a view Brown himself supports in his introduction: “There is a great deal of reminiscence [in these columns]; not only shreds of my own childhood, ‘the vision splendid’, but for the simpler and more meaningful community that Orkney used to be. The outer world has intruded successfully into our silences and secrets.”²⁷ The conflation of simplicity and meaning here is notable: in essays such as this Brown treats the modern world as a system of complexity which erodes a primal simplicity that was necessary to allow community. Iain Crichton Smith’s assessment of the columns, that “they reveal a real person in a real place”,²⁸ is here particularly apt. The columns focus on a *placed* community, and point towards a harmony of location and community to which Brown most often advocates a return, or at least approaches with nostalgic longing. Here there is no sign of “masks” and “actors”, but only of real people in real places.

Brown occasionally reflects, however, on the impossibility of returning to a proper community: “most of us have come so far away from that poor earth-rooted beautiful way of life that to go back would be more painful than to struggle on into the age of the Atom”.²⁹ There is something perhaps intentionally disingenuous in such a statement, the beginnings of a recognition that this “beautiful way of life” has not been accidentally lost, but intentionally left behind. In his reflections on the types who “have disappeared from our streets and roads”³⁰ – fiddlers, tinkers, lamplighters, postmen –

Brown fluctuates between a purely nostalgic vision of past community and a recognition that the roles filled by the members of that community are no longer needed. Even as he laments the passing of the ideal community, Brown recognises that such a community came about, if it ever existed, not in order to fulfil an ideal but out of the demands of a particular time and place, demands which are themselves now irrelevant. From these passages, it appears that a community is not, and perhaps has never been, the unified whole Brown imagines, but instead serves as a systematic approach towards individuality. There are, indeed, two types of community to which Brown simultaneously refers: there is the actual community, a function of geography and history, that provides a context for his writing – “It was a very depressed little community that I was born into” (*FI* 15) – and there is this second community, one which is based on the confluence of individuals. The former is most often his concern in *Letters from Hamnavoe*, but he does not write of such a community entirely naively, expecting a full return to a glorious past. It is this latter form of community to which Nancy most often refers: “The unity of the world is not one: it is made of a diversity, and even disparity and opposition”.³¹ It is this latter form, too, to which Brown refers when he talks of the masks needed to enter a community. The difficulty in reading Brown’s work as a statement on community, however, comes about from his conflation of the two senses, a willingness to see the geographico-historical community and the community which exists in the revelation of difference as essentially inseparable and co-existent, tied together by an undefined “community spirit”.³²

The latter sense of community has already been explored extensively in the preceding chapters. Brown’s interest in the geographico-historical basis of community,

however, is noteworthy in itself, not least because it is the view of community with which he is most closely associated. This notion of community is of the sort found in many rural texts, and made most explicit in the later works of Heidegger, where he writes:

The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. [...] The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* insofar as he *dwells*, this word *bauen* however *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.³³

The second half of this famous quotation most immediately illuminates Brown's idea of a community founded in agricultural labour: "I came, as the years passed, to see the farmers and fishing-folk, and their work, as the most important in any community" (*FI* 33). Throughout Brown's writings there is a clear sense that geographical community is not an accident as such, but is predicated on the working of a specific area of land and an opening up of awareness about the relation between land and people. This sense mirrors at heart the Heideggerian notion of dwelling: dwelling is not only inhabiting the land, but entering into a relationship with it. This sense forms the basis for all interpretations of Brown's work as pastoral; his community is entirely dependent on agriculture not only for subsistence, but also for identity. In pure opposition to Nancy, for whom "community cannot arise from the domain of *work*",³⁴ in these writings of Brown and Heidegger it is labour itself which forms the basis for community, specifically as that labour relates to the land in which the community exists. For the purposes of this chapter, however, what is far more interesting in relation to Brown is the first half of this citation. Heidegger establishes a connected chain of being in order to explicate this notion of dwelling: you are, I am, we humans are. Although he does not make it explicit in his later writings, this is Heidegger's final notion of being-with, so apparently simple as to require no explanation. Dwelling cannot occur in isolation, but only in the co-presence of

individuals understood as a “we”. What you are and I am is ultimately “we”. Being-with does not only reveal difference, but sameness, or unity, as well; when being-with becomes co-dwelling, it establishes community. Heidegger writes that, in dwelling, mortals save the earth, not only in terms of snatching it from danger, but as a way of “setting something free into its own presencing.”³⁵ Surely it is not only the presencing of the earth to which Heidegger refers here, but the presencing of the community as well, the way in which the community serves to reveal individuals as what they are through being-with. It is here that *Mitsein* implicitly begins to be read as *Gemeinschaft*; being-with, in these later writings of Heidegger, cannot be understood solely as the way in which individuals are, but also becomes the way in which communities are. Even Heidegger’s focus on the physicality of the community in this essay points towards a changed conception of being-with, one which is quite literally *grounded* in both place and others.

Brown also writes of this notion, in which the geographical situation in which a community dwells is essential, but at the same time not the complete expression of a given community:

The spirit of a town is in the people. Beauty and vitality flow through generations, however a town might change from a garden to a maze of sooty stone. Environment must be important, but the ever-renewing spring, brimming over in a community (laughter and lore) is not easily defiled, though factory chimneys rise. (*FI* 101)

Both Brown and Heidegger use a heightened, wilfully poetic language in these citations in order to signify the very strangeness of their notion of community: this holistic community has become the property of art, and is expressed through art, in a way which is not readily apparent through simple observation of a given actual community. Here

Brown comes dangerously close to what Jerome McGann calls “the grand illusion of every Romantic poet”: the idea that poetry can supersede the actualities of history and culture.³⁶ Brown uses this notion of the revealing power of art, however, in order to show not how art can bypass reality, but how it can show the truth of community. This explains Brown’s continual focus on the physical basis of his work, its similarity to farming or fishing. Art only has the revealing power Brown claims for it if it is based on the actual physical presencing of a real community. For Brown and Heidegger, art reveals community to be being-with, predicated on a being-in of an environment, but more specifically related to the way in which people co-exist. Both the citations from Brown and Heidegger come from works written relatively late in their authors’ careers, at such a point when the impossibility of community presented in *Greenvow*, or the use of being-with only to reveal *Dasein* revealed in *Being and Time*, are apparently no longer of great concern. Here, for both authors, dwelling is revealed as “both caring for and being cared for”.³⁷ Dwelling is thus the combination of, or the relationship between, the actual physical community and a more abstracted human community, both of which are necessary to provide this dual care-function. The community of “laughter and lore” is one of care, and one which to a certain extent overcomes the essential nihilism which underlies human existence. Within the language Brown and Heidegger use, this latter form of whole community is revealed as continual possibility: for Brown, community is “an ever-renewing spring”, while in Heidegger, the problem and solution to communitarian existence lies in the way in which humans “must ever learn to dwell”.³⁸ The impossibility of community is thus recognised but presented as a solvable problem: humans will learn to dwell; the spring will renew. There is still, however, something

dissatisfying in these explanations, in the way the impossibility of community as unity has been disregarded in favour of a communal unity which is at heart poetic and which perhaps ignores a stringent metaphysical approach to the nature of being.

As Julian Young argues, a Heideggerian notion of dwelling “requires an art that has overcome metaphysics”.³⁹ Community, when it is approached through this artistic sensibility, initially appears to be presented in these later works as a solution to the problems of metaphysics. In *Being and Time*, the fundamental nature of life in the world is presented as anxiety: “Being-in-the-world itself is that in the face of which anxiety is anxious”.⁴⁰ Anxiety is, in the early Heidegger, that which reveals the world to be what, and how, it is. If dwelling provides security in the form of caring for and being cared for, then to a certain extent it necessarily overturns metaphysics. This cannot only be a question of art: if metaphysics, as shown above, is the way in which the relation between Being and beings is understood, and that relational difference is the core of community, then a community which is understood as caring or dwelling is not only distinct from, but entirely opposed to, a community of difference. It would be easy to mark this shift from a community of difference to a community of dwelling, seen to a certain extent in both Brown and Heidegger, as a function of age or of changing notions of metaphysics across time, but this fails to explain the extent to which in Brown’s work these two oppositional notions of community co-exist. It is not enough to look at the years which passed between the writing of *Greenvow*, in which individual difference is revealed as central to community at the same time that it undermines it, and *Beside the Ocean of Time*, in which the individual life is able to encapsulate all that was valued in community, and thus provide renewal, as sufficient to explain the difference in Brown’s understanding of

community in the two works. In the citations from his autobiography above, it is clear that Brown uses the term “community” to refer, in Heideggerian terms, to both anxiety and care, often simultaneously. In Brown’s work community is both impossible and ever-renewing, tied primarily to the land and primarily to the people, revealing of difference and best understood as unity, all at the same time. He writes of the world as a “blighted wholeness”⁴¹ in which both the blight and the wholeness are given equal attention and are presented as irreconcilable but simultaneously present. What makes Brown’s work challenging is that his community can never be straightforwardly read as either anxiety or care, neither as nostalgic unity nor modern dysfunction, but must always be read as both simultaneously. Community is not a solution to anxiety, and does not overcome metaphysics, but instead merely exists concurrently.

In this paradoxical understanding of community, Brown creates a paradigm similar to that of Blanchot who, writing in response to Nancy, formulates a “negative community”:

if the relation of man with man ceases to be that of the Same with the Same, but rather introduces the Other as irreducible and – given the equality between them – always in a situation of dissymmetry in relation to the one looking at that Other, then a completely different relationship imposes itself and imposes another form of society which one would hardly dare call a ‘community.’ Or else one accepts the idea of naming it thus, while asking oneself what is at stake in the concept of a community and whether the community, no matter if it has existed or not, does not in the end always posit the *absence* of community.⁴²

There is thus a perpetual dual understanding of community: community is still thought of as the relation of “the Same with the Same”, the unified community which a writer such as Brown situates within a verifiable geographico-historical continuum, but “community” is also the term used to express the questioning of this first form. If this unified community has perhaps never existed, if communities have never been formed around

unity but only around difference, then ‘community’ becomes a way of exploring the absence of what is already defined as community. Community, in the revealing of Otherness, is what is revealed in the absence of a community that functions through a revealing of sameness. While Brown certainly writes with the belief that this unified community did exist, and may perhaps be recapturable, he also uses the word to refer to the dissolution of that ideal community and to its revealing in impossibility. His work is thus balanced between a depiction of community as it should be, and as it perhaps may have been, and community as it is now revealed only through its absence.

This paradox, as made explicit by Blanchot, begins to explain the way in which Brown’s writing of community functions both as a eulogy for something which is past and a prescription for the way in which humans should live. Communal life, for Brown, is the way in which the “complex interweavings” of human intercourse are best made clear, even when the community as it is is not complete or unified (*FI* 17). Individuals always exist both as themselves and in relation to a community, even a mythic one: “real Orkney country folk [...] can be encountered any day on a road or a seashore; but too, they are a part of the fable, as though they had always been, and always will be”.⁴³ Elsewhere he writes that: “the townsfolk are part of [a] web of legend”.⁴⁴ The “fable” or “legend” in this instance is that of community; even in its absence it is the way through which people are best understood. Community is a fabular metanarrative, no less convincing or necessary for its impossibility. As Schoene has shown, Brown brings forth the notion of a “community with a singular, self-constant identity” through the creation of “historical myth”: “a real-life discovery and a construction of the mind”.⁴⁵ This focus on community as fable permits Brown to maintain a notion of anxiety or negativity as

central to human existence while also proposing a desired unity. As in the writings of Blanchot, humans cannot come to understand themselves without recourse to this fable of community, for it is only in the otherness revealed by community that understanding can take place: “If human existence is an existence that puts itself radically and constantly into question, it cannot of itself alone have that possibility which always goes beyond it”.⁴⁶ For Brown and Blanchot both, community is that which goes beyond bare human existence, and thus even in its absence is absolutely necessary.

B. Death and the Turn

The parallels between Brown’s complex views of community and those of Nancy and Blanchot (both here explicitly interpreting and reworking Bataille) also serve to explain Brown’s focus on individual death. In the fiction, this focus is best illustrated in *Magnus*, in which the sacrifice of an individual serves to create and sustain community, but echoes can be seen in all of Brown’s writing, notably in the degree to which his nonfiction is concerned with the remembrance of individual lives. A lengthy section of his uncollected writings, *Northern Lights*, is dedicated to his obituaries, eulogies, remembrances and other works of mourning. In each, the death of the individual is presented not only as an individual loss, but as it is relevant to the community. Of his father, for instance, Brown writes:

A quintessence of dust, he lies in a field above Hoy Sound among all the rich storied dust of Stromness. The postman had left the last door, he had quenched the flame in his lantern. The tailor had folded the finished coat and laid it aside. He was at rest with fishermen, farmers, merchants, sailors and their women-folk – many generations.⁴⁷

Brown's father is thus portrayed, or even explained, both through the communitarian roles he had in life (postman, tailor) and the community he joins in death. Both in life and death, the individual is defined in terms of the community of which he has been a part. In neither case is this a chosen or intentional community, but instead community becomes the way in which the life of the individual is understood and valued. Whether in revealing sameness or otherness, the individual is who he is by virtue of the community within which he lives (and dies). More importantly, however, the death of the individual also comes to define the community. When a man (in this instance, Ernest Marwick) dies, he leaves remnants of himself within the community: "we knew that a great and a good man had gone from this generation of Orcadians; but had left treasures behind still to be estimated, and a most fragrant memory".⁴⁸ Implicit in such a statement is the notion that the treasures left behind are not only found in remembrance and nostalgia, but continue to create the community after the individual death. The life and death of the given individual serve to make the community what it is. Another man is said to "take his place among the shining dead of local legend".⁴⁹ The community's sense of itself and the way in which community is revealed to itself, come from the observation of the death of the individual. As such, this community is predicated on the events of linear time (the birth and death of the individual), but also to a certain extent exists outside of linear time, as the death of the individual is always anticipated and always present. As Blanchot writes, "There could not be a community without the sharing of that first and last even which in everyone ceases to be able to be just that (birth, death)".⁵⁰ Or in Nancy: "Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. [...]"

The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their

impossible community.”⁵¹ The way in which the individual is able to be revealed to himself is through his revelation to others, and this revelation, for both Brown and those theorists following Bataille, comes through the presence of death. Departing from a Heideggerian being-towards-death, however, the death of the individual gains significance and is fully revealed not in terms of *Dasein* but as a function of community. The death of the individual reveals the community to itself. For Brown, community itself becomes an act of remembrance, a unity which is impossible because it is only revealed as the disparate individuals who constitute it die. As in Bataille, “Each one of us is then driven out of the confines of his person and loses himself as much as possible in the community of his fellow creatures. It is for this reason that it is necessary for communal life to maintain itself at a level *equal to death*.”⁵²

As has been shown in his novels, however, Brown is not content to show the way in which community reveals itself to itself only through the death of the individual, but through the death of the community as a whole. With the exception of *Vinland*, all of Brown’s novels revolve around imminent disaster, whether it comes in the form of the clearance of the islands or a more general apocalypse. In stories such as “The Wireless Set” (*A Time to Keep*) or “The Paraffin Lamp” (*Winter Tales*), technological invention itself is introduced as a force against which individual members must buttress themselves. In this recurrent theme of a man-made force or invention which threatens to destroy the community, Brown echoes Heidegger, who sees “modern technology as a means towards an end”.⁵³ And yet Heidegger takes this further to argue that this view of technology as means is artificial, created by the disguising that is the basis of Enframing. By “Enframing”, which can be read as the essence of technology, Heidegger refers not to

the exhibits or artefacts of technology, but to an underlying comportment which, while revealed most clearly through these physical constructions, is in fact a larger approach to Being itself. Technology for Heidegger is not “technological”: it is not based on physical science or the machine, although these manifestations are not wholly distinct from it. Technology is the way in which Being is now known. It is a way, or rather the way, of revealing the truth. Technology is thus a pervasive, inescapable mode of understanding; it is a way of understanding in which everything is determined in advance. Yet for Heidegger it can still be questioned, for within its potential complacency exists great danger. “Enframing comes to presence as the danger”,⁵⁴ he writes, by which he means that the danger is not present only in nuclear apocalypse or, in the sort of example Brown favours, the wireless, but in the cultural mind-set of which these innovations are a manifestation. Enframing is the way in which humans objectify the world, and yet is not, for instance, a development of the Enlightenment or the modern era, but something which is both everpresent and always a danger.

This notional enframing is also, perhaps, the underlying structure behind Brown’s condemnation of the artefacts of technology, and the manner in which he depicts the coming of a wireless set or a newspaper to the Orkneys to be as destructive as nuclear war; it is not the thing itself which presents imminent danger, but the way in which the conception of technology and Being are intertwined. For Brown, too, the artefacts of technology are those things which most clearly reveal the danger of enframing, and to a certain extent allow imminent danger to be overlooked because it has been recognised. This use of technology, in a Heideggerian sense as well as a practical one, to represent the end of the community begins to point towards a third conceptualisation of community

in Brown's writing: community here becomes that which cannot be objectified, that which is unconcealed, that which has recognised the danger which was always present within itself. In Heideggerian terms, Brown's ideal community is that of the "turning", the way in which a community or an individual comes to recognise "that truth is disclosive concealment and the world merely the intelligible 'side' of the unfathomable 'mystery'".⁵⁵ Turning, in Brown's terms, is the discovery that community is fabular or mythic but cannot be renounced. For Heidegger, turning is that which occurs when Enframing is recognised as danger; one could almost argue that the recognition of danger placates it. "[T]he turning of the oblivion of Being into the safekeeping belonging to the coming to presence of Being – will finally come to pass only when the danger [...] first comes expressly to light as the danger that it is."⁵⁶ Enframing and technology initially seem to be the markers of the fallenness from grace and of the separation from an ideal or whole way of living which creates the nostalgia pointed to by writers such as Brown. For Heidegger, however, when they are recognised as what they are, they can bring about a turn towards an attending to Being. "When the danger is as the danger, there the saving power is already thriving also."⁵⁷ When danger is recognised as itself – which constitutes the turn – it reveals itself to already embody its own saving. Thus the solution to the problems which arise from enframing already exist within that enframing; the recognition of the imminent danger in that enframing brings about a new "insight into that which is" and reveals the truth of Being.⁵⁸

Enframing and community are, insofar as they form the basis for understanding the way in which Being is revealed for Heidegger and Brown respectively, not at all dissimilar. For Heidegger, Enframing is not wholly unrelated to community, for it is "the

gathering together that belongs to that setting-upon which sets upon man and puts him in position to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve”.⁵⁹ From this notion of gathering, it would appear that Enframing is, in a sense, the community which exists in order to allow the singular individual to reveal truth as it is. If we understand community to be the mode of understanding that reveals individual difference, then Enframing is that which performs this function. Yet Enframing is far more ambiguous than that, for it is only in the turn that Enframing, or technology, shifts from being the oblivion of Being to its safekeeping. Similarly, the use of community and its saving are revealed only when community is itself revealed to be impossible and mythic. Only in looking at community as something impossible can it be revealed to show a truth about the nature of Being, specifically Being-together. Brown focuses on community as myth or nostalgia in order to allow a turning: the dangers of such a perspective also incorporate their own saving. Much like Brown’s notion of community, in which community is that which reveals the individual to be what she is, but which also requires masks and acting to be entered, Heidegger advises caution when approaching Enframing, for it both disguises and reveals.

Brown’s focus in his later work is on the revealing potential of community: truth is revealed, or unconcealed, through gathering. This unconcealing, for Brown, takes place in part through storytelling and through art:

Much of the old story-telling has withered before the basilisk stare of newsprint, radio, television. Maybe, the people reckoned, after 1873, it was better to forget the ancient sorrows and joys. There had been too much hardship. The promised land lay all before them. [...] Every community on earth is being deprived of an ancient necessary nourishment. We cannot live fully without the treasury our ancestors have left to us.⁶⁰

This passage reveals a basic understanding of the place of community in modernity: community, as a repository of stories, exists not despite modernity, or the technological mind-set, but in direct opposition to it. Brown's community is one which is always turning: one in which the truth, whatever it may be, has been revealed before and will be revealed again, but in which oblivion is always imminent and concealedness is always present. In order for the community to exist in this potential unconcealedness, in opposition to the disguise of technology, it must occupy a liminal space between life and death, between "too much hardship" and "the promised land", between "ancient sorrows and joys". The community in Brown's work is always portrayed as being on the brink of the disaster because, in this third understanding of community, that is the only place it could possibly exist. It is only when the community as a whole dies that it gains life, only when the community ends that its renewal is possible. The unconcealedness of community thus rests upon both the imminence of the death of the individual and the death of the community as a whole, and further on the recognition within that community of this imminent death. It is notable, however, that for Brown this unconcealedness is revealed only through art, specifically through storytelling. History is itself "a mask [...]; it is impressive and reassuring, it flatters us to wear it" (*OT* 11). Storytelling, however, marks a return to a "kind of celebration".⁶¹ For Brown, it is within this celebration, in defiance of history, that truth can be revealed.

This celebratory art is the sort that Heidegger would call anti-metaphysical. As Young interprets Heidegger: "the world-historical take-over by 'enframing', the fact that it has become the disclosure of Being which *defines* the modern epoch is [...] only made possibly by the completion of a long and gradual, historical process in terms of which

Western humanity has lost [...] the ‘festive’ mode of disclosure”.⁶² This festive mode marked a separation from everydayness, as is currently the case, but moreover, in reference to Hölderlin, “the meeting of gods and men”.⁶³ Young is of course referring to the unturned sense of enframing here, in which it disguises truth. Brown irregularly envisions (for it must be remembered that the tone of many of his works, from *Greenvoe* on, is one of despair) a work of art which performs the turn of enframing, which reintegrates the festive mode into everyday life. The work of art which belies this loss is one which is both created and received in community.⁶⁴ This sort of work of art takes the heritage of community and forms it into “the outline ‘shape’ of [the community’s] proper future, its ‘destiny’”.⁶⁵ In this transition we can see the way in which Brown uses historically-based, but fundamentally ahistorical, narratives in order to create and remember the turned community. This in part arises because for Brown art, especially literature, is a communal activity: “the poem, song, or painting, is not the work of one man labouring in isolation, but it is a whole community expressing its fears, hopes, joys. The artist is merely the instrument through which the whole tribe speaks”.⁶⁶ Narrative art is closely tied to the life of the community, because it is itself an expression of community. For Young too, this view of art is closely related to being-with, because it is art which allows a community to be possible at all. Art is fundamentally preservational: it preserves and creates both truth and community. “Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work.”⁶⁷ This initially seems contradictory: how can art possibly preserve that which it at the same time originates? For Young, it does this through connecting the world and “people”, not people in general but more specifically an originary community: art “also preserves its

living existence and with it the ‘people’ it has brought into being”.⁶⁸ It is this way in which art is simultaneously a creation of, and from, the community, and yet creates the community from outside itself in order to preserve it, that allows us to reconcile the seeming unity of community portrayed in so much of Brown’s writings with the despairing belief that community is ultimately impossible at the same time that it is equally present.

Art, in this late Heideggerian sense, is the way in which truth is revealed; more centrally, the work of art “lets the earth be an earth”,⁶⁹ it lets the world world. That is to say, it is through the work of art, not as an artefact but as an event, that things reveal themselves to be as they are. “If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work.”⁷⁰ The artwork is thus at once experienced in time, but is essentially timeless. The work of art is a happening of disclosure and unconcealing; it is not in phenomenological experience that the truth of human existence can be revealed, but in the happening of art. This comes about because, as Heidegger points out, the work of art does not depict things as they are or as they could be experienced or manipulated by a subject, but in their general essence.⁷¹ Art exists outside of the sphere of individual experience in order to point towards a truth which cannot be recognised from within that experience. The work of art, as portrayed in Heidegger, is thus perceived in the same way as community is perceived in Brown: it is at once predicated on the historico-geographical reality of a time and place, but also essentially outside of time. Community’s existence in this dual sphere is the only way in which it can approach the truth: it is only because community to a certain extent, as an idea(l), exists outside of time

that it can reveal the truth of human life and can become a guarantor of unconcealedness. The impossibility of community in actual everyday life is thus less important than it initially appears, because through art, community can be revealed to be that which is, in a fundamental sense, true.

In Brown's autobiographical writings, he treats "legendary and historical sources" (*FI* 9) similarly: they are both approaches to an existing community, a way of revealing the truth of the perceived moment through that which is outside that moment. In doing so, he self-consciously puts himself in a continuum of modern writing, naming Joyce, Eliot, Beckett, Mann and Chekhov as predecessors, as writers who revealed that "it is the common man who holds the rarest treasures. There, lost, is the 'immortal diamond'" (*FI* 27). What Brown attests to in his citation of these authors is the degree to which they map something outside of time onto the individual grounded in time. The work of art, specifically twentieth-century literary art, is that which allows the individual (and, implicitly, the community as well), to be revealed to himself: "It is a word, blossoming as legend, poem, story, secret, that holds a community together and gives meaning to its life" (*OT* 29). The work of art creates, preserves, originates and unconceals the community in a way nothing intrinsic to the everyday life of the community could ever do.

Indeed, for Brown it is only from outside, either through art or through death, that the truth of things can be understood. Reflecting on the burial practices of primitive Orcadians, Brown writes:

So it seems they lavished far more care on their 'houses of the dead' than on the huts and hovels they passed their days in. The dead had gone, not into nothingness, but 'into another intensity' (as T.S. Eliot put it.)

There perhaps, the meaning of their miserable few years on earth was made plain to them. There, perhaps, they existed in a timeless beauty, nobility, heroism.⁷²

This is a remarkable passage for several reasons. First, it is notable that Brown's language for describing the awareness of life that takes place after death is markedly similar to the language he uses elsewhere to describe the effects of poetry. Speaking of significantly more recent inhabitants, Brown writes that: "The people lived close to the springs of poetry and drama, and were not aware of it" (*FI* 167). Poetry and death both serve to reveal that which is concealed in everyday life; they are, again, Brown's representation of a Heideggerian turning. It is in an essay on Edwin Muir, indeed that Brown most clearly states that "Death is not a negation of life but a completion and a celebration".⁷³ Death itself is tied to the festive mode of life, and of poetry, of which Heidegger saw echoes in Hölderlin. The passage is also notable for the way in which it makes Brown's despair of contemporary life clear. It is not only twentieth-century life which demonstrates that "There will never be a good society, there are too many flaws in human nature" (*FI* 183), but it is the human perception of life in its everydayness, in its nontranscendence, which is a constant barrier to unconcealedness or truth. Those within a community, whether it be a local one or the global community of all those alive at a given moment, cannot recognise what good there may be in their lives. It is only from the outside, either through death or through art, that revealing begins. Finally, Brown's citation of Eliot is worth mentioning. Eliot is a surprisingly constant muse in Brown's work; combined with the mentions of Joyce and Beckett above, it begins to be clear that Brown sees his project as falling in line with that of the modernists; he is not involved in recreating a past community so much as rethinking a present one.

C. Critical Reactions

And yet, for all of Brown's subtle working of communitarian theory and for all of the ways in which he gestures to his contemporaries in both literature and philosophy, in short for all of the ways in which he repeatedly demonstrates himself not to be a dewy-eyed Romantic, he remains cloistered in a nationalistic, ruralist ghetto. Contemporary reviews of his work, and especially the surveys written at the time of his death, continually focus on the way in which he inhabited a real community, and make him a spokesperson for an impossible rural idyll.⁷⁴ A typical review of *Beside the Ocean of Time* begins:

George Mackay Brown is totally removed from the fashionable literary scenes of Edinburgh or Glasgow, let alone London. He lives simply in the Orkney mainland in a small house off the main street in Stromness. He rarely travels ("I don't like travelling; I don't need to travel; I just take voyages of the imagination.")⁷⁵

Popular criticism of Brown's works almost invariably opens in such a fashion, as if it were impossible to read his fiction without citing the lived experience theoretically at its root. He is repeatedly described as "umbilically attached to Orkney",⁷⁶ writing of "the timeless simplicity of the islands",⁷⁷ sharing with all rural and island writers "an enhanced sensitivity to the rhythms of [his] environment".⁷⁸ Scores of reviews and appreciations share this tone, content to read Brown as an exemplar of island life and rural communities in general. As a recent review of the *Collected Poems* noted: "One of the most common complaints about Mackay Brown's work – that it remains circumscribed by his narrow island experience and so is largely irrelevant to the wider modern world – is precisely the reason that many people love it".⁷⁹ The majority of Brown's obituaries place him as a character within his own texts, distrustful of progress and somehow in touch with a different way of life: "Famous for his nostalgic grasp of a

simpler way of life in a world increasingly dominated by modern machinery, he continued to write his works in pen at his kitchen table”.⁸⁰ Even Douglas Dunn, one of his more sympathetic critics, calls Brown “a modern poet of the pre-Modern”.⁸¹ It would be possible to quote sentiments of this nature at even greater length, but it should suffice to note that there are two primary sentiments that recur in the popular criticism. The first is that Brown was able to write of the Orkneys in a way that reduced or expanded them to archetypal status:

Virtually everything he has written has presented Orkney life, past and present, as archetypal, an elemental expression of the meaning of life itself, conveyed through a consistent and overwhelming symbolism of land and sea, of seasonal change and the rites of passage of birth, fruition and death.⁸²

The second, more strident claim is that: “In many ways, Brown created the myth of Orkney. A fabulist, he wrote of an Orkney that never was, and yet always was”.⁸³

No author should be judged solely by his or her contemporary popular criticism, of course. It is remarkable, however, how consistent this criticism has been over the past thirty years: whether Brown is viewed either as a fabulist who has created a mythic Orkney or a realist who writes only of the island life around him, he is always viewed as a provincial writer, one whose main, perhaps only, concern is the life of the Orkneys.⁸⁴

In another recent appraisal, James Campbell locates the archetypal quality of his characterisations in his status as a “popular poet”.⁸⁵ his very accessibility is taken as revealing a certain “timeless” truth about the material with which he deals, insofar as it is drawn both from reality and myth. Brown himself perpetuates this view of his work as firmly rooted in a non-academic, populist world-view: “I drew much of my inspiration (if such a thing exists) from the tillers of earth and sea that the whole engine of education had been devised to lift the worthy ones and the hard studiers clear of” (*FI* 33). At the

same time that he attempts to separate himself from education, he writes elsewhere of the symbolic use of labour: “Without the rich imagery that flows from the labour of sailor, farmer, fisherman, I would hardly string two lines together. Those earth-workers and sea-workers stand at the very sources of life, very powerful symbols, and it is there that literature and all the arts have their beginning.”⁸⁶ Brown’s apparent desire to see himself within a tradition of physical labour and yet at the same time to treat those who labour as symbols is distressing and perhaps patronising. Yet many critics have taken him at his paradoxical word. There are dozens of personal recollections, as well as interviews, which supplement this notion of Brown as a writer firmly enmeshed in a living community, but drawing upon mythic and symbolic sources to explicate it. Indeed, one critic has argued that, without the influence of Muir’s symbolism: “Brown’s work would have remained parochial and of little interest to readers outside of Scotland”.⁸⁷ There is an implicit argument here that Brown’s work is in fact parochial, but has achieved its popularity by dressing up that parochialism in mythical and symbolic narratives. Other critics merely state that for Brown both the local and the universal are always present. In an interview published shortly after his death, Gavin Bell imagines Brown as a ghost:

Mackay Brown has gone off on his travels again. Eventually somebody might fix a commemorative plaque to the grey wall of his house by the bay, and one day you might see an old man with white hair regarding it with a bemused smile. Don't be alarmed if he disappears – it will just have been George paying a visit from the place he calls the Ocean of Time.⁸⁸

This view of Brown as both ultimate insider and perpetual outsider is representative of much of the criticism that has been written in the past decade: Brown is seen as entirely of the community, but also somehow outside of it. It is no doubt a perspective of which Brown would have approved. Yet there is a great danger in such sentiments: such

thinking eradicates what subtlety there may be in Brown's writing.

In order to read Brown as a chronicler of community, it is necessary to see such a community as a pre-existing whole, a concept that, as has been shown elsewhere, Brown does not accept. These views of Brown's life and work as the culmination of life in an actual community pay little heed to the warning Murray and Murray see at the heart of his early work: "the artist in Orkney can find no proper place in the community."⁸⁹ At the end of his autobiography he writes of the need for a varied perspective on community life: "any small community is a microcosm. It is not necessary to stray very far from your back yard. The whole world gathers about the parish pump. But stories from under the horizon ought always to be welcome" (*FI* 180). It is this sense of a necessary multiplicity of perspectives which Brown welcomes and which the vast majority of popular critics have ignored. Dunn, in the recent article cited above, is almost alone in his recognition that Brown was far more interested in writing of an Orcadian myth than in documenting a particular reality: "Despite his myth of rootedness and his encyclopaedic experience of his native place, there were islands of which he wrote but never visited".⁹⁰ Brown himself, in a late interview, makes this sentiment explicit: "I write my best things about experience that I've never had and things that I have never seen."⁹¹ To read Brown as writing only of, and from, the Orkneys is to limit his value as a thinker of community, as an observer of enlightenment and as a writer engaged with the world as it is, not only as it should be.

Academic criticism has often taken a similar tone to the popular criticism cited above. In her early reappraisal of *Greenvoe*, Elizabeth Huberman, while arguing that Brown is "not a regional writer", still grounds the initial value of his work in its regional

veracity:

Since George Mackay Brown is himself a native of the Orkneys, where he has lived all his life, and since he writes exclusively about the people of these remote green islands off the northern coast of Scotland, he is able to present the image of this distant region with consummate authority and skill.⁹²

Even as Huberman attempts to advance an argument that “the universal is only too visible in this regional disaster”,⁹³ she continually uses language which points to the reducibility of Brown’s work to the regional. There is a foreignness in Brown’s vision upon which Huberman continually focuses: its focus on community “sets it apart from other novels”. Huberman’s argument that Brown “employs the local [to show] the universal” is unsupported in her argument, because she fails in any way to indicate what this universal might be. “Greenvoe’s plight really moves us more than our own”,⁹⁴ she argues, but by clearly separating the fate of the Orkneys from that of the rest of the world, she fails to connect fully the regionally specific with her vague conceptualisation of the universal. An argument such as this ultimately undermines itself: in pointing almost exclusively to what is unique in Brown’s work – its Orkney setting, its communal focus, even its apparently reclusive author – Huberman implicitly convinces the reader that the work does not need to be taken seriously as anything other than regional fiction. This argument is pitched closely to that of Alan Bold who, at the end of his monograph, argues that Brown is a writer “who has so completely mapped out his own artistic territory that he competes with no one”.⁹⁵ While Bold intends this as the highest compliment, such an assertion implies that Brown does not need to be taken seriously as a modern world writer, but only as an Orcadian, or even Brownian, one. Again, the language in which Bold makes his arguments is more revealing than the arguments themselves: “Brown’s work [...] is like a vast ocean over which shine starlike images and symbols. He takes us

on a timeless voyage on the ocean and makes us aware of the profound depths beneath the glittering surface”.⁹⁶ The language and imagery Bold uses in his criticism of Brown are identical to those of Brown himself: for Bold, Brown exists in a world unto himself, and can thus only be examined individually. Clearly this is a problematic approach to a body of work: not only does it not allow Brown’s work to be compared, whether stylistically or ideologically, with contemporary or historical works, but it refuses to acknowledge any aspects of Brown’s writing which may not fit into this pre-defined model of what his writing should be. Whether Brown is being thought of as a Scottish writer, an Orcadian writer, or a writer who can only be compared with himself, the end result is clear: Brown’s work cannot be said to engage with the world as a whole, or to have anything to offer more than is superficially present.

Cairns Craig, in a brief discussion of *Greenvoe*, repeats these dismissive notions more stridently: “it is at one with a landscape which may be a site through which history passes, but which can never be incorporated to the trajectories of humanity’s historical meanings”.⁹⁷ For Craig, Huberman, and many other writers,⁹⁸ Brown is first and foremost a writer of local identity, and for those readers who do not share that identity, the works are to a certain extent escapist. The problems of the Orkneys remain limited to one small area of the world, and are always distinct. For Craig, this is symptomatic of a larger Scottish inability to come to terms with history: “Scotland is quite simply a world to which narrative, and therefore history, is alien”.⁹⁹ Accordingly, Craig in his readings of Brown focuses on the mythic elements, as well as the regional, as a way of demonstrating that the works are symptomatic of a cultural inability to approach a grand historical narrative. For a critic such as Craig, then, Brown’s work is best understood as

being explanatory of a larger Scottish cultural paradigm, an inability to think past national or geographico-historical borders: “be Scottish and your achievement is necessarily local”.¹⁰⁰ Craig’s larger purpose is to explore how a culture can move past an imposed or adopted parochialism, but in doing so he writes the books he studies into a decidedly parochial paradigm. For Craig, Scottish fiction of the twentieth century cannot be seen as anything other than regional – and as such necessarily limited – without disrupting his larger thesis on the nature of Scottish identity.

Berthold Schoene’s response to claims of this nature is to praise Brown’s regionalism:

One wonders what is the great danger in becoming known as ‘the Orkney poet’. Why should Brown’s Orkney be less interesting than James Joyce’s Dublin, Thomas Hardy’s Wessex, William Faulkner’s imaginary country of Yoknapatawpha or the Mearns of Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *A Scots Quair*?¹⁰¹

For Schoene, criticism of Brown’s work on the basis that it is too regional is located in “Scotland’s cultural inferiority complex” which must be rethought. He here echoes Craig, and would seem to be pointing towards a reading of Brown’s work which both allows its regionalism and simultaneously places it in a more global context. And yet the lasting value of these texts, according to Schoene, remains local: “The gradual establishment of Brown as Orkney’s literary spokesman over the past four decades has instigated a revival of the Orcadian tradition in literature and strengthened the islanders’ sense of a distinct identity”.¹⁰² Brown’s work thus gains significance as it reveals the identity of those people about whom he writes to themselves. This idea ultimately enforces the understanding of Brown’s value as being finally regional. Certainly there are Dubliners or Mississippians who have come to understand themselves through Joyce or Faulkner, but very few would argue that this is the great achievement of those writers.

Instead, what makes these texts remarkable is the way in which they appeal to the universal, not in Huberman's vague conception, but as explicit explorations of the nature of human interaction and of the ways in which communal and individual identities support and disturb each other. The underlying project of virtually all the major writers of the twentieth century who are to some extent labelled "regional", from Faulkner to Laxness, has been to show the dissolution of community and the rise of individual identity. Any reading of Brown's work which focuses only on his Orcadian, or even Scottish, identity disallows a comparison with such works, and also excludes any reading of Brown as not only a chronicler, but a *thinker* of community. Schoene's final conceptualisation of an "identity-bearing mythic authenticity"¹⁰³ ultimately echoes Craig's claim that the "mythic content [...] denies the forward trajectory of the furrow of history".¹⁰⁴ While what exactly it is Craig means by "history" has not been explored in this thesis, such statements confirm Brown's status as a parochial writer. The regional, the mythic, the simplistic narratives may have their place, but they are always understood in such arguments as necessarily limited.

These various critical perspectives can be best understood as making use of the unconscious ideology marked by Jerome McGann: in them, as in the critics of Romanticism on whom McGann focuses, the "scholarship is weakened only to the degree that its point of view does not (perhaps it cannot) account for all the available data".¹⁰⁵ McGann's argument is not that it is possible, or even advisable, to have a critical argument which is objective and free from ideology, but that the basis of that ideology must be examined, for "no critical polemic will succeed, or will help to advance its total view, when it allows its discourse to operate at a relatively casual level".¹⁰⁶ For all the

great value of these readings, many of the critics above focus on the ways in which Brown illuminates a specific regional literature to such an extent that they occasionally obfuscate the philosophical subtlety of his work. As shown throughout this thesis, the lasting value of Brown's work comes not through the conclusions he reaches about the nature of community, but in the varied ways in which he explores such ideas. As easy as it would be to read Brown's fiction as a paean to the ideal community, his work is significant because he undermines such a reading within the work itself.

Intriguingly, in his insistence on a mythic reading of Brown, Schoene begins to point to a more philosophically relevant conceptualisation of his work: "What draws Brown back to modernism is his belief in myth. His quest for identity and meaning is no random search but informed by the notion that the truth of a universally applicable value system exists and can be found."¹⁰⁷ For Schoene, as for Brown himself, this larger value system is explicitly Christian, a "shaping divinity [that] takes over from our rough-hewings" (*FI* 186). And yet Brown's lasting value is not as a Christian apologist, but as a chronicler of everyday existence, an existence, in the words of Heidegger, that is "poetical" in its fundamental aspect".¹⁰⁸ For Heidegger, poetry is that which shores existence against disaster:

Poetry is the act of establishing by the word and in the word. What is established in this manner? The permanent. But can the permanent be established then? Is it not that which has always been present? No! Even the permanent must be fixed so that it will not be carried away, the simple must be wrested from confusion, proportion must be set before what lacks proportion.¹⁰⁹

This is in part, and perhaps the greater part, Brown's goal in all of his work. He uses his fiction to place before the reader an opening out of Being, a way of unconcealing, which fixes, or at least echoes, the permanent, or the truth. And yet there is much in Brown of

Blanchot's disaster. There is always within his writing the sense that the permanent may be carried away at any minute and that the simple is entwined with confusion. Disaster is imminent, and poetry can only stave it off insofar as it recognises that imminence.

Brown's great contribution to literature, and philosophy, is to think of art and community as occupying the middle ground between the unconcealing fixity of Heidegger and the disaster of Blanchot. By restricting his theme to that of the individual and community, Brown is able to explore how a community is actually lived, how it is revealed, and how, perhaps, it has been and should be. This thesis has only been able to examine his novels, a small portion of his work, and the short stories and poetry are ripe for similar exploration. And yet, even in this limited survey of his work, it is clear that Brown tackles the issue of community and individual life more fully than many of his contemporaries, and that he cannot be thought of as solely a regional writer, but as a writer of modern life as a necessarily disjointed whole. In his praise of Tolstoy, Brown writes that the artworks created by an individual "are not theirs only but have come from the community in which they live" (*FI* 39). Brown's work also occupies this liminal space, at once the artistic creations of an individual and of a community, not only the physical community of the Orkneys, but the larger intellectual community of all those who are willing to think through what it means to exist on this earth. His work is thoroughly of the past, but also thoroughly modern, and cannot be seriously appraised as anything other than a reconsideration of modern life. In his emphasis on community, and his subtle reworkings of that notion across the body of his work, Brown asks the question of how it is that individuals come to live with each other, define each other and be defined by each other: there is perhaps no more important question to address. For all its

trappings of intellectual and ideological primitivism, Brown's fiction is rare in its commitment to rethinking communitarian life and, as such, must be considered alongside of, and as a counterpart to, the major twentieth-century theorists of being and community.

NOTES

¹ Fergusson 1.

² Robin Fulton, Contemporary Scottish Poetry: Individuals and Contexts (Loanhead, Midlothian: MacDonald Publishers, 1974) 114.

³ Maurice Fleming, "Voice of Orkney," Scots Magazine 104.6 Mar. 1976: 614.

⁴ Esther Garke, "In Memoriam George Mackay Brown: The Reception of His Work in German," Chapman 84 1996: 30.

⁵ Clearly Heidegger was not the first to think Being, but his interpretation is dominant in the foundation of many modern schools of thought about Being, and thus is as good a starting point as any.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, Identity and Difference, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 51.

⁷ Heidegger, Identity and Difference 65.

⁸ Thomas Sheehan, "Reading a Life: Heidegger and Hard Times," The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 90.

⁹ Georges Bataille, Inner Experience, 1954, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 4.

¹⁰ Nancy, Inoperative Community 18.

¹¹ Nancy, Inoperative Community 6. Italics in original.

¹² Heidegger, Being and Time 153.

¹³ Heidegger, Being and Time 160. Italics in original.

¹⁴ Michael Haar, "The Enigma of Everydayness," trans. Michael B. Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault, Reading Heidegger: Commemorations, ed. John Sallis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) 26.

¹⁵ Christopher Fynsk, "The Self and Its Witness; On Heidegger's Being and Time," boundary 2 10.3 Spring, 1982: 190.

¹⁶ Simon Critchley, Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought (London and New York: Verso, 1999) 240.

¹⁷ Nancy, Inoperative Community 9.

¹⁸ Nancy, Inoperative Community 9.

¹⁹ George Mackay Brown, "An Autobiographical Essay," As I Remember: Ten Scottish Authors Recall How for Them Writing Began, ed. Maurice Lindsay (London: Robert Hale, 1979) 21.

²⁰ Nancy, Inoperative Community 10.

²¹ Derrida, Jacques Derrida, Politics of Friendship, 1994, trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997) 47.

²² Derrida, Politics of Friendship 37.

²³ Christopher Fynsk, foreword, The Inoperative Community, by Jean-Luc Nancy, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) xv-xvi.

²⁴ Nancy, Inoperative Community 10.

²⁵ Nancy, Inoperative Community 28.

²⁶ George Mackay Brown, Letters from Hamnavoe (Edinburgh: Gordon Wright, 1975) 12.

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- ²⁷ Brown, Letters from Hamnavoe v.
- ²⁸ Iain Crichton Smith, "Books from the Journalism," George Mackay Brown: A Survey of His Work and a Full Bibliography, ed. Hilda D. Spear (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000) 17..
- ²⁹ Brown, Letters from Hamnavoe 61.
- ³⁰ Brown, Letters from Hamnavoe 127.
- ³¹ Nancy, Being Singular Plural 185.
- ³² Brown, Northern Lights 4.
- ³³ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought 145. Italics in original.
- ³⁴ Nancy, Inoperative Community 31. Lydia Davis notably translated Nancy's concept of "*désœuvrement*", here rendered as "inoperative(ity)" as "worklessness".
- ³⁵ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought 148.
- ³⁶ McGann 137.
- ³⁷ Julian Young, Heidegger's Philosophy of Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 129.
- ³⁸ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought 159.
- ³⁹ Young 134.
- ⁴⁰ Heidegger, Being and Time 232.
- ⁴¹ Hart 395.
- ⁴² Blanchot, Unavowable Community 3.
- ⁴³ George Mackay Brown, introduction, Selected Prose, by Edwin Muir, ed. Brown (London: John Murray, 1987) 11.
- ⁴⁴ George Mackay Brown, "Scenes from a Provincial Life," Ms. 3116.1 (University of Edinburgh Library) 3.
- ⁴⁵ Schoene 100-101.
- ⁴⁶ Blanchot, Unavowable Community 8.
- ⁴⁷ Brown, Northern Lights 150.
- ⁴⁸ Brown, Northern Lights 158.
- ⁴⁹ Brown, Northern Lights 166.
- ⁵⁰ Blanchot, Unavowable Community 9.
- ⁵¹ Nancy, Inoperative Community 15.
- ⁵² Quoted in Nancy, Inoperative Community 15. Italics in original.
- ⁵³ Heidegger, Question Concerning Technology 5.
- ⁵⁴ Heidegger, Question Concerning Technology 37.
- ⁵⁵ Young 127.
- ⁵⁶ Heidegger, Question Concerning Technology 41.
- ⁵⁷ Heidegger, Question Concerning Technology 42.
- ⁵⁸ Heidegger, Question Concerning Technology 46.
- ⁵⁹ Heidegger, Question Concerning Technology 24.
- ⁶⁰ George Mackay Brown, Winter Tales (London: John Murray, 1995) vii-viii.
- ⁶¹ George Mackay Brown, The Masked Fisherman and Other Stories (London: John Murray, 1989) x.
- ⁶² Young 123.
- ⁶³ Young 85.
- ⁶⁴ Young 50-1.

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- ⁶⁵ Young 55.
- ⁶⁶ George Mackay Brown, "As to the business of writing..." Ms. 3116.2. (University of Edinburgh Library).
- Brown, "As to the business of writing..." unpaginated.
- ⁶⁷ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought 75.
- ⁶⁸ Young 58.
- ⁶⁹ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought 45.
- ⁷⁰ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought 35.
- ⁷¹ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought 36.
- ⁷² George Mackay Brown, Under Brinkie's Brae (Edinburgh: Gordon Wright, 1979) 57.
- ⁷³ Brown, "Broken Heraldry" 143.
- ⁷⁴ Although published too late for inclusion in this thesis, Robert Crawford's recent article "In Bloody Orkney" (London Review of Books 29.4 22 February 2007: 23-25) suggests that this trend may be changing; Crawford's account of Brown's life and poetry is notably more nuanced than those published even several years earlier.
- ⁷⁵ Duncan 4. Please see Chapter 1 for similar notices.
- ⁷⁶ Alan Taylor, "Traveller from Eden of Orkney," The Sunday Herald 18 Feb. 2001: 10.
- ⁷⁷ Richard Edmonds, "Bathing in Light from a Northern Island Sky," Birmingham Post 26 June, 1999: 60.
- ⁷⁸ Simon Hall, "Brightly Shines the North Star," Scotland on Sunday 20 June, 1999: 13.
- ⁷⁹ Rachel Campbell-Johnston, "Poetry," The Times [London] 18 June, 2005 Weekend Review: 12.
- ⁸⁰ Iain Martin and Richard Fairbairn, "Rural Voice Mackay Brown Dies," Sunday Times [Scotland] 14 April, 1996: 3.
- ⁸¹ Douglas Dunn, "An Island Voice: Memories and Myths of George Mackay Brown," Times Literary Supplement 11 Aug. 2006: 3.
- ⁸² Douglas Gifford, "George Mackay Brown," The Scotsman 15 April, 1996: 9.
- ⁸³ Ron Ferguson, "The Myths of Orkney Crafted at the Kitchen Table," The Herald [Glasgow] 11 June, 2005: 7.
- ⁸⁴ Indeed, the Orkneys themselves are often rarefied in contemporary writing. In a piece on Edwin Muir, Alan Massie questions: "just what exactly, for instance, is 'an organic community' when the term is used for something larger than an Orkney parish, and how would we recognize one?" Alan Massie, introduction, Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer, by Edwin Muir (Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 1982) vi-vii. Such statements patronisingly imply that community in the Orkneys can be considered whole in a way that no other community could.
- ⁸⁵ James Campbell, "Fishbone and Crust," Times Literary Supplement 12 Aug. 2005: 8.
- ⁸⁶ Brown, "Scenes from a Provincial Life" 3-4.
- ⁸⁷ N.D. Garriock, "George Mackay Brown: Juvenilia to Loves and Fishes," Chapman 60 April, 1990: 3.
- ⁸⁸ Gavin Bell, "Songs of the North Wind," The Herald [Glasgow] 27 April, 1996: 2.
- ⁸⁹ Murray and Murray 24.
- ⁹⁰ Dunn, "An Island Voice" 4.
- ⁹¹ William Sharpton, "'Hamnavoe Revisited': An Interview with George Mackay Brown," Chapman 84 1996: 24.

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- ⁹² Huberman, "Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe*" 33.
- ⁹³ Huberman "Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe*" 34.
- ⁹⁴ Huberman "Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe*" 34.
- ⁹⁵ Bold 111.
- ⁹⁶ Bold 113.
- ⁹⁷ Craig, Out of History 59.
- ⁹⁸ The basic claim that Brown's work can best be understood as primarily a local fiction has surfaced throughout this thesis in scores of reviews and criticisms, which for purposes of space and coherence cannot be re-cited here. Note should be especially given to Murray and Murray's recent full-length study, Interrogation of Silence, however, which is the first critical work to largely move away from this view.
- ⁹⁹ Craig, Out of History 37.
- ¹⁰⁰ Craig, Out of History 11.
- ¹⁰¹ Schoene 9.
- ¹⁰² Schoene 269.
- ¹⁰³ Schoene 270.
- ¹⁰⁴ Craig, Modern Scottish Novel 161.
- ¹⁰⁵ McGann 28.
- ¹⁰⁶ McGann 30.
- ¹⁰⁷ Schoene 270.
- ¹⁰⁸ Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," trans. Douglas Scott, Existence and Being, ed. Werner Brock (London: Vision Press, 1949) 306.
- ¹⁰⁹ Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry" 304.

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